

PAY FOR YOUR PLEASURES: CULTURAL CRITIQUE IN THE WORK OF  
MIKE KELLEY, PAUL MCCARTHY AND RAYMOND PETTIBON

by

CARY S. LEVINE

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Art History  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2006

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the  
Graduate Faculty in Art History in satisfaction of the  
dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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## Abstract

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Advisor: Professor Romy Golan

This dissertation is an interdisciplinary study of three artists working in Southern California since the 1970s. Using numerous mediums and employing strategies of the grotesque, caricature and perversion, Mike Kelley, Paul McCarthy and Raymond Pettibon each force the viewer into confrontation with his or her own expectations and assumptions, destabilizing some of Western culture's most entrenched ideals and social norms. Though they are hardly the first artists to attack such conventions, these artists offer a new, disenchanting form of critique—an acerbic cultural politics that operates against ideological dogmatism, essentialism and idealism, on both the Right and the Left. Their work embodies a profound shift in attitude, a disillusioned outlook characteristic of the post-sixties generation to which they belong. Examining this work through the lenses of popular culture, sociology, gender studies, cultural anthropology and psychology, this study distinguishes their tactics from those of their predecessors and contemporaries, while contextualizing this shift within the social and political history of the 1970s, 1980s and beyond.

*For Alyse*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are certain people without whom this dissertation would not exist. My advisor, Romy Golan, has been much more than an advisor. Her persistent support and friendship were indispensable, as were her guidance, her criticality and her willingness to say it how it is and then argue about it. She has been a true *Doktormutter* in every sense of the word.

As my unofficial *Doktorvater*, Robert Storr has been equally seminal. If Romy carried this dissertation through, it was with Rob that it was conceived. He is responsible for opening my eyes to the full significance of Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon's work. Our periodic talks then kept me going during writing lulls and moments of self-doubt, while his straight-talk and sense of (black) humor kept me grounded, making it easier to pursue what is a rather un-academic topic.

Close friends and fellow dissertators Philip Glahn and Lisa Young were also essential. They were my real "first-readers," and their incisive feedback was crucial to the formulation of my ideas and the structure and direction of my arguments. Even more importantly, their moral support, empathy and encouragement was—and continues to be—vital to my work, career and overall sanity.

Without my family, of course, nothing would be possible. My parents have provided me with the two most important resources: the confidence to do things my own way and the knowledge that they will always back me when I do. My wife, Alyse, to whom this dissertation is dedicated, has provided me with just about everything else. She

is my sounding board, my cheering section, my breadwinner, my therapist, my partner, my love and in many ways my hero. This is her Ph.D. as much as it is mine.

Lastly, I would like to extend a special thanks to my son, Oliver, for lending empirical support to some of my ideas (especially in chapter four) and for not breaking the computer before I had a chance to finish. And most of all, to both he and his sister, Maya, for brightening every single moment of every single day.

## CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	vi
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS .....	ix
LIST OF MUSIC TRACKS.....	xvi
INTRODUCTION: PAY FOR YOUR PLEASURES.....	1
Chapter	
1. THE NOISE OF ART: A PRELUDE IN PERVERSITY .....	37
Rock-n-Rebellion	
To Shock is Chic	
2. SEXUAL CONVOLUTION.....	117
Coitus Interruptus	
Pornotopia	
3. BENDING GENDER .....	182
Caught in the Zipper	
Manly Crafts	
Meat Cake	
4. THE KIDS AREN'T ALL RIGHT.....	240
The Adolescentization of Dissent	
Plushophilia	
CONCLUSION: THE (DE)CIVILIZING PROCESS .....	295
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	312
ILLUSTRATIONS .....	326

## ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure	Page
1. John Wayne Gacy, <i>Pogo the Clown</i> , detail from Mike Kelley, <i>Pay for Your Pleasure</i> , 1988.....	327
2. Mike Kelley, <i>Pay for Your Pleasure</i> , 1988.....	327
3. Paul McCarthy, <i>My Doctor</i> , 1978.....	328
4. Raymond Pettibon, <i>Untitled (I am your reflection)</i> , 1986.....	328
5. Martha Rosler, <i>Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful</i> , 1967-72.....	329
6. Hans Haacke, <i>Shapolsky et al Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time System, as of May 1, 1971</i> , 1971.....	329
7. Judy Chicago, <i>Red Flag</i> , 1971.....	330
8. Raymond Pettibon, <i>Untitled (This is 1968)</i> , cover of <i>Tripping Corpse Four</i> , 1984.....	330
9. Paul McCarthy, <i>The Garden</i> , 1991-92.....	331
10. Paul McCarthy, <i>Political Disturbance</i> , 1976.....	331
11. Mary Corita Kent, <i>I in Daisy</i> , 1969.....	332
12. Mike Kelley, <i>Trash Picker</i> , 1987.....	332
13. Woodstock Music and Art Fair poster, 1969.....	332
14. Mike Kelley, <i>Heart and Flower</i> , 1987.....	333
15. Mike Kelley, <i>The Escaped Bird</i> , 1987.....	333
16. Raymond Pettibon, <i>Untitled (Took LSD)</i> , in <i>Tripping Corpse Four</i> , 1984.....	334
17. Raymond Pettibon, <i>Untitled (It wasn't like this)</i> , in <i>Tripping Corpse Twelve</i> , 1990.....	334
18. Paul McCarthy, <i>Inverted Hallway</i> , 1970.....	334

19.	Paul McCarthy, <i>Plaster Your Head and One Arm into a Wall</i> , 1970.....	334
20.	Paul McCarthy, <i>Hot Dog</i> , 1974 .....	335
21.	Mike Kelley, <i>Painting with Hawaiian Mask, Ballerina, and De Stijl</i> <i>Painting</i> , 1976.....	335
22.	Raymond Ginn (Pettibon), <i>Untitled (If that guy)</i> , 1975.....	336
23.	Raymond Pettibon, <i>Untitled (Citizen's award)</i> , 1978.....	336
24.	Paul McCarthy, <i>Meat Cake</i> , 1974.....	337
25.	Paul McCarthy, <i>Tubbing</i> , 1975.....	337
26.	Paul McCarthy, <i>Sailor's Meat</i> , 1975 .....	337
27.	Mike Kelley, <i>Elegy to the Symbionese Liberation Army</i> , 1975.....	338
28.	Mike Kelley, <i>In Anticipation of America's Bicentennial</i> , 1975.....	338
29.	Raymond Pettibon, <i>record album covers</i> , early 1980s .....	339
30.	Raymond Pettibon, <i>Untitled (You can keep)</i> , 1985.....	339
31.	Raymond Pettibon, <i>Untitled (Helter Skelter)</i> , in <i>Tripping Corpse 1</i> , 1981.....	339
32.	Raymond Pettibon, <i>Untitled (Loud, louder)</i> , 1985 .....	340
33.	Raymond Pettibon, <i>Untitled (This one's for you)</i> , in <i>Tripping Corpse 11</i> , 1988.....	340
34.	Raymond Pettibon, <i>Untitled (We've got another)</i> , in <i>Tripping Corpse</i> <i>Twelve</i> , 1990 .....	340
35.	Raymond Pettibon, <i>Untitled (Of course)</i> , 1982 .....	341
36.	Raymond Pettibon, <i>Untitled (Don't think of it)</i> , 1985.....	341
37.	Raymond Pettibon, <i>Untitled (I was born)</i> , 1985.....	341
38.	Raymond Pettibon, <i>Untitled (Somebody's gotta learn)</i> , 1985 .....	341
39.	Raymond Pettibon, <i>Untitled (I've heard some)</i> , in <i>New Wave Gravy 2</i> , 1985.....	342

40.	Raymond Pettibon, <i>Untitled (Hey punks)</i> , in <i>New Wave Gravy 2</i> , 1985 .....	342
41.	Raymond Pettibon, <i>Untitled (I thought I could)</i> , in <i>New Wave Gravy 2</i> , 1985.....	342
42.	Mike Kelley, <i>Pansy Metal/Clovered Hoof</i> , 1989.....	343
43.	Mike Kelley, <i>Skull</i> , from <i>Pansy Metal/Clovered Hoof</i> , 1989.....	343
44.	Cover of Motörhead album, <i>Overkill</i> , 1979.....	343
45.	Mike Kelley, <i>Emerald Eye Hole</i> , from <i>Pansy Metal/Clovered Hoof</i> , 1989.....	344
46.	Mike Kelley, <i>The Orange and Green</i> , from <i>Pansy Metal/Clovered Hoof</i> , 1989.....	344
47.	Raymond Pettibon, <i>Untitled (Mother would simply die)</i> , in <i>Tripping Corpse Four</i> , 1984 .....	344
48.	Mike Kelley, <i>Orgone Shed</i> , 1992 .....	344
49.	Paul McCarthy, <i>Family Tyranny</i> , 1987.....	345
50.	Raymond Pettibon, <i>Untitled (It may not seem)</i> , in <i>Bottomless Pond</i> , 1986.....	345
51.	Paul McCarthy, <i>Cultural Gothic</i> , 1992.....	345
52.	Raymond Pettibon, <i>Untitled (I don't want to live)</i> , in <i>A New Wave of Violence</i> , 1982.....	346
53.	Raymond Pettibon, <i>Untitled, console, heal, or depict... (OK, that was Bill)</i> , 1984 .....	346
54.	Raymond Pettibon, <i>Untitled (You're the first girl)</i> , in <i>The Express Sex Train</i> , 1985.....	346
55.	Raymond Pettibon, <i>Untitled (I've given about 10 fuzz)</i> , in <i>The Pleasure- Giving Arts</i> , 1990.....	346
56.	Mike Kelley, <i>Missing Time Color Exercise</i> , 1998.....	347
57.	Mike Kelley, <i>'69 Action Heroes</i> , 1998 .....	347

58.	Raymond Pettibon, <i>Untitled (I've had sex)</i> , in <i>Tripping Corpse Eleven</i> , 1988.....	348
59.	Raymond Pettibon, <i>Untitled (They would rather I slaughtered)</i> , 1987 .....	348
60.	Raymond Pettibon, <i>Untitled (Leaving Commune)</i> , 1982.....	348
61.	Raymond Pettibon, <i>Untitled (Sexual freedom)</i> , in <i>Pettibon with Strings</i> , 1988.....	348
62.	Raymond Pettibon, <i>Untitled (I just couldn't take)</i> , in <i>Capricious Missives</i> , 1983.....	349
63.	Raymond Pettibon, <i>Untitled (I quit the team)</i> , in <i>The Pleasure-Giving Arts</i> , 1990.....	349
64.	Feminist Art Program, <i>Womanhouse, Menstruation Bathroom</i> , 1971 .....	349
65.	Raymond Pettibon, <i>Untitled (I came too fast)</i> , in <i>Lana</i> , 1984.....	350
66.	Raymond Pettibon, <i>Untitled (Caught in the zipper)</i> , in <i>Lana</i> , 1984.....	350
67.	Raymond Pettibon, <i>Untitled (Perhaps the fact)</i> , cover of <i>Cars, TV, Rockets, H-Bomb—You Name It</i> , 1985 .....	350
68.	Raymond Pettibon, <i>Untitled (My mother turned me on)</i> , in <i>A New Wave of Violence</i> , 1982 .....	351
69.	Raymond Pettibon, <i>Untitled (My first orgasm)</i> , in <i>Capricious Missives</i> , 1983.....	351
70.	Raymond Pettibon, <i>Untitled (Who am I?)</i> , 1987 .....	351
71.	Raymond Pettibon, <i>Untitled (My mouth felt like)</i> , 1992.....	351
72.	Mike Kelley, <i>More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid</i> , 1987 .....	352
73.	Jim Dine, <i>Hair</i> , 1961 .....	352
74.	Eva Hesse, <i>Untitled (Rope Piece)</i> , 1969-70.....	353
75.	Mike Kelley, <i>Manly Craft #3</i> , 1989.....	353
76.	Mike Kelley, <i>Untitled (Yarn)</i> , 1990.....	354
77.	Carl Andre, <i>144 Lead Square</i> , 1969 .....	354

78.	Mike Kelley, <i>Arena #1 (Blue and Red)</i> , 1990 .....	355
79.	Mike Kelley, <i>Arena #9 (Blue Bunny)</i> , 1990 .....	355
80.	Mike Kelley, <i>Mooner</i> , 1990.....	356
81.	Mike Kelley, <i>Colema Bench</i> , 1992.....	356
82.	Mike Kelley, <i>Kneading Board</i> , 1992.....	357
83.	Mike Kelley, <i>Torture Table</i> , 1992 .....	357
84.	Paul McCarthy, <i>Rocky</i> , 1976 .....	358
85.	Paul McCarthy, <i>Face Painting-Floor, White Line</i> , 1972.....	358
86.	Paul McCarthy, <i>Whipping a Wall With Paint</i> , 1974.....	359
87.	Paul McCarthy, <i>Painter</i> , 1995 .....	359
88.	Paul McCarthy, <i>Experimental Dancer – Rumpus Room</i> , 1975 .....	360
89.	Vito Acconci, <i>Conversions. Part II (Insistence, Adaptation, Groundwork, Display)</i> , 1971.....	360
90.	Paul McCarthy, <i>Contemporary Cure All</i> , 1978 .....	361
91.	Paul McCarthy, <i>Inside Out Olive Oil</i> , 1983.....	361
92.	Raymond Pettibon, <i>Untitled (I masturbated four times)</i> , in <i>Capricious Missives</i> , 1983.....	362
93.	Raymond Pettibon, <i>Untitled (Snowman has a mask)</i> , in <i>Capricious Missives</i> , 1983.....	362
94.	Raymond Pettibon, <i>Untitled (Mommy came home)</i> , in <i>Capricious Missives</i> , 1983.....	362
95.	Raymond Pettibon, <i>Untitled (Now do you want)</i> , in <i>Bottomless Pond</i> , 1986.....	362
96.	Raymond Pettibon, <i>Untitled (I miss some)</i> , in <i>Bottomless Pond</i> , 1986 .....	363
97.	Paul McCarthy, <i>Baby Boy, Baby Magic</i> , 1982 .....	363

98.	Paul McCarthy, <i>Pinocchio Pipenose Household dilemma</i> , 1994 .....	363
99.	Raymond Pettibon, <i>Untitled (I stole my sister's boyfriend)</i> , in <i>Pettibon with Strings</i> , 1988 .....	364
100.	Raymond Pettibon, <i>Untitled (Double suicide)</i> , in <i>Capricious Missives</i> , 1983.....	364
101.	Raymond Pettibon, <i>Untitled (Turn on tune in)</i> , in <i>Tripping Corpse 1</i> , 1981.....	365
102.	Mike Kelley, <i>Junior High Notebook Cover</i> , 1984.....	365
103.	Mike Kelley, <i>Reconstructed History (Sniff my finger)</i> , 1989 .....	366
104.	Mike Kelley, <i>Reconstructed History (Franklin signing)</i> , 1989 .....	366
105.	Mike Kelley, <i>Three-Point Program/Four Eyes</i> , 1987 .....	367
106.	Mike Kelley, <i>DAM logo (The Spirit of Adolescence)</i> , 1993 .....	367
107.	Raymond Pettibon, <i>Untitled (Thirteen)</i> , 1985 .....	367
108.	Raymond Pettibon, <i>Untitled (When I want to get a guy's)</i> , 1986 .....	367
109.	Raymond Pettibon, <i>Untitled (Sometimes you gotta)</i> , 1985.....	368
110.	Raymond Pettibon, <i>Untitled (Shall we listen to hard rock?)</i> , in <i>New Wave Gravy 2</i> , 1985.....	368
111.	Mike Kelley, <i>Ahh, Youth!</i> , 1991 .....	369
112.	Mike Kelley, <i>Arena #5</i> , 1990.....	369
113.	Mike Kelley, <i>Innards</i> , 1990.....	370
114.	Mike Kelley, <i>Arena #2 (Kangaroo)</i> , 1990.....	370
115.	Mike Kelley, <i>Arena #10 (Dogs)</i> , 1990.....	371
116.	Paul McCarthy, <i>Mother Pig</i> , 1983.....	371
117.	Paul McCarthy, <i>PROPO</i> , 1992 .....	371
118.	Mike Kelley, <i>Plush Kundalini and Chakra Set</i> , 1987 .....	372

119.	Mike Kelley, <i>Homesick (Personified Lump and Its Pure State)</i> , detail, 1991.....	372
120.	Mike Kelley, “ <i>Lumpenprole</i> ” installation, 1991 .....	373
121.	Paul McCarthy, <i>Bear and Rabbit</i> , 1991 .....	373
122.	Paul McCarthy, <i>Skunks</i> , 1993 .....	373
123.	Raymond Pettibon, <i>Untitled (All my groupies)</i> , in <i>Bottomless Pond</i> , 1986.....	373
124.	Mike Kelley, <i>Manipulating Mass-Produced Idealized Objects</i> , 1990 .....	374
125.	Mike Kelley, <i>Nostalgic Depiction of the Innocence of Childhood</i> , 1990.....	374
126.	Paul McCarthy, <i>Grand Pop</i> , 1977 .....	375
127.	Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy, <i>Heidi</i> , 1991 .....	375

## MUSIC TRACKS

### CD Track

1. Gobbler, "That's My Baby," on *Skin of Flesh All Mighty!* (Compound Annex, 1997).
2. Gobbler, "Hey! Ho!," on *Skin of Flesh All Mighty!* (Compound Annex, 1997).
3. Gobbler, "Rock-A-Pauly," on *Skin of Flesh All Mighty!* (Compound Annex, 1997).
4. Gobbler, "The Load," on *Skin of Flesh All Mighty!* (Compound Annex, 1997).
5. Destroy All Monsters, "That's My Ideal," on *Destroy All Monsters, 1974-1976* (Ecstatic Peace/Father Yod, 1994).
6. Destroy All Monsters, "Puke Like a Motherfucker," on *Destroy All Monsters, 1974-1976* (Ecstatic Peace/Father Yod, 1994).
7. Destroy All Monsters, "I Love You, But You're Dead," on *Destroy All Monsters, 1974-1976* (Ecstatic Peace/Father Yod, 1994).
8. Sür Drone, "Sagitariass'uh," on *Sür Drone* (Love Unlimited, 1998).
9. Sür Drone, "Booty Ooty Girrl," on *Sür Drone* (Love Unlimited, 1998).
10. Sür Drone, "Space Mutha Succa Mum," on *Sür Drone* (Love Unlimited, 1998).
11. Destroy All Monsters, "Mom's and Dad's Pussy," on *Destroy All Monsters, 1974-1976* (Ecstatic Peace/Father Yod, 1994).

## INTRODUCTION

### PAY FOR YOUR PLEASURES

Against a background of brushy evergreen trees, a pudgy man in red, white and blue face-paint and a pompom hat gazes down at an unseen child, waving furtively. “I’m Pogo the Clown” reads the button on his striped costume. It is a self-portrait of John Wayne Gacy, the amicable, Chicago-area businessman who viciously raped, tortured and murdered thirty-three teenage boys, burying their bodies under the floorboards of his house (fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> Gacy produced this image while on death row, portraying himself in the costume he had worn as an entertainer at a local children’s hospital. What would otherwise be dismissed as the work of a third-rate Sunday painter is, in light of its signature, pregnant with ghastly meaning.

It is irresistible. Violating society’s most essential rules of behavior, Gacy is the ultimate outsider artist, his painting a window into the mind of a madman. The childish style reinforces this status, its crudity read as a sign of primitiveness, of an obviously uncivilized nature. If, however, the curiosity is morbid, it is also safe. Aroused by the suggestion of absolute evil, one ogles at the monster’s pathetic painting without empathy, as an alien specimen—that is, without any hint of self-incrimination. In the end, this

---

<sup>1</sup> Gacy was arrested in 1978, tried in 1980 and executed by lethal injection in 1994. For a complete account of his crimes and trial, see *Killer Clown: The John Wayne Gacy Murders*, by Terry Sullivan with Peter T. Maiken (New York: Pinnacle Books, 1983).

condescension reaffirms our own moral wellbeing, our normalcy in opposition to Gacy's barbarity. We are not him.

Or, are we?

This painting is the prime attraction of Mike Kelley's installation, *Pay for Your Pleasure* (fig. 2), first exhibited at the University of Chicago in 1988.<sup>2</sup> Set in a glass display case, Gacy's clown is the centerpiece of a long hallway wallpapered floor-to-ceiling with a progression of multicolored banners. Each features a provocative quote by a renowned poet, painter or philosopher, inscribed above a large-scale portrait of its author. Together, they form a chorus of enlightened voices, singing paeans to creative freedom, to the artist's immunity from natural and human law:<sup>3</sup>

In our oh-so-cultured society it is necessary for me to lead the life of a savage.  
- [Gustav] Courbet

If rape or arson, poison or the knife, has wove no pleasing patterns in the stuff of this drab canvas we accept as life—it is because we are not bold enough.  
- Charles Baudelaire

Those who restrain desire do so because theirs is weak enough to be constrained.  
- William Blake

The simplest surrealist act consists of dashing down the street, pistol on hand, and firing blindly...into the crowd.  
- Andre Breton

I want to sing murder, for I love murderers.

---

<sup>2</sup> *Pay for Your Pleasures* was part of the exhibition "Three Projects: Half a Man, From My Institution to Yours, Pay for Your Pleasures," at the Renaissance Center at the University of Chicago, May 4 – June 30, 1988. It has subsequently been installed with different works of art by local criminals, as per Kelley's instructions.

<sup>3</sup> Howard Singerman, "Mike Kelley's Line," in *Three Projects: Half a Man, From My Institution to Yours, Pay for Your Pleasures* (Chicago: the Renaissance Center at the University of Chicago, 1988), 9.

- [Jean] Genet

Imagination lies in wait as the most powerful enemy. Naturally raw, and enamored of absurdity, it breaks out against all civilizing restraints like a savage who takes delight in grimacing idols.

- [Johann Wolfgang von] Goethe

I do not understand laws. I have no moral sense. I am a brute.

- [Arthur] Rimbaud

The fact of a man being a poisoner is nothing against his prose.

- Oscar Wilde

These are just some of the forty-three incendiary quotes that line Kelley's corridor.<sup>4</sup>

Long and repetitive, the installation is a litanous declaration of artistic autonomy, evidently a central tenet of Western cultural tradition, from Plato to Michel Foucault. A special being, the artist must be liberated from restraint and ordinary standards of judgment—free to break with convention just as the criminal breaks laws.<sup>5</sup> Presumably schooled in such ideas, the consenting visitor is blindsided by the odd clown painting at the end of the hallway. When affixed to Gacy's self-portrait, this millennia of philosophical accord is thrown into crisis. Can the psychopath's work ever be separated from his grisly deeds? Is the fact that Gacy was a poisoner really nothing against his prose?

*Pay for Your Pleasure* is a trap. Cunningly laid by Kelley, it ensnares the viewer in an irresolvable quandary; for, of course, the painting can never be divorced from the

---

<sup>4</sup> For a complete list of the quotes included in *Pay for Your Pleasures*, see *Three Projects*, 28-29.

<sup>5</sup> As Robert Storr has pointed out in reference to this work, the notion of the artist-as-criminal is “an article of faith dear to modernists and postmodernists alike, not to mention anti-establishment thinkers, writers, and artists from ancient times onward” (Robert Storr, “Eye Infection,” in *Eye Infection*, ed. Christiaan Braun [Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum and Richter Verlag Düsseldorf, 2001], 25).

horrendous acts of its homicidal creator. Presented alongside the work of a real criminal, the chorale of idealistic epigrams—this “obviously overdone rationalization system,” in Kelley’s words<sup>6</sup>—is betrayed as empty rhetoric. In this sense, the installation serves a didactic purpose. Yet, Kelley does not resort to straight polemics; unlike the lineup of aestheticians, he refuses to preach platitudes. Instead, he constructs an inherently contradictory situation and keeps quiet. (Indeed, it is impossible to say what Kelley’s personal views are on the multitude of issues raised here.) Using the viewer’s own culturally constructed beliefs against themselves, he provokes an irresolvable clash between doctrine and practice, between calls to action and actual actions.<sup>7</sup> The rhythmic reaffirmation of those beliefs by the work’s pedagogic corridor only makes its final collision more jarring.<sup>8</sup> Anticipating this response, Kelley adds a third component to his installation: a donation box for victims’ rights organizations—a request for a little “guilt money,” as he calls it.<sup>9</sup> Visitors are asked to not only acknowledge, but take some

---

<sup>6</sup> Mike Kelley, “Three Projects: Half a Man, From My Institution to Yours, Pay for Your Pleasures” (1988), reprinted in *Minor Histories: Statements, Conversations, Proposals*, by Mike Kelley, ed. John C. Welchman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 18.

<sup>7</sup> Singerman, 9.

<sup>8</sup> In this sense, my reading of the work opposes Howard Singerman’s previously cited essay, which appears in the catalogue for *Pay for Your Pleasure*’s original installation. Singerman suggests that Kelley “hopes finally to unify the wavering but never quite dissoluble poles of the work’s duality, to unite the sides, to offer a common denominator, an exchange value” (Singerman, 10). I would argue that the goal is, in fact, the opposite: to make the wedge between theory and practice immovable and irresolvable.

<sup>9</sup> Kelley, “Three Projects,” 18.

responsibility for a cultural legacy that validates their own perverse curiosity.<sup>10</sup> They must literally and figuratively pay for their pleasure.

Such effects characterize Kelley's eclectic body of work, which includes performance, installation, drawing, painting, video, and sculpture. Since the mid-1970s, the artist has consistently pursued a strategy of entrapment, luring viewers into paradoxical situations that confound some of society's most entrenched values and norms. Rather than limiting himself to a particular style or form, his medium of choice is cultural meaning itself. Manipulating objects, techniques, materials and languages that carry such meaning, Kelley repeatedly forces theory and practice into direct confrontation with each other. Viewers are consequently goaded into rethinking fundamental distinctions between normality and abnormality, good and bad, high and low, liberal and conservative, the natural and the unnatural.

Kelley is not alone in this approach. Though stylistically distinct, fellow Los Angeles-based artists Paul McCarthy and Raymond Pettibon have employed similar strategies of coerced contradiction since their early careers. As with Kelley, their work exploits viewer expectations and presumptions in order to dislocate essential cultural ideals. A key participant in the 1970s West Coast performance-art scene, McCarthy has more recently favored video, sculpture, and installation. Regardless of medium, his work has continually challenged social boundaries and restrictions associated with the body. Obscenity, absurdity, disgust and self-abuse are all tools in his arsenal—his work often

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<sup>10</sup> Kelley points out that, ordinarily, we are permitted to indulge our curiosity without such responsibility. "We are not interested in Gacy's brushwork or images," he points out, "we are interested in the man behind them, the person capable of incredible atrocities. The paintings allow us to stare safely at the forbidden" (Ibid.).

grueling for both the artist to enact and audiences to witness. Like Kelley, he employs an anthropological approach, exploring the cultural connotations of everyday objects, substances and routines. Thus, as McCarthy describes it, his work “might be seen as a form of research.”<sup>11</sup> But whereas Kelley’s gestures are generally dispassionate and cerebral, McCarthy’s are riotous and manic. He often enacts an orgiastic hyper-indulgence in materials—most notably, food products—misusing them in ways that pervert conventional classifications and connotations. The artist uses this technique to explore the processes by which social standards are conditioned in the home, via mass media, and through social institutions at large.

In *My Doctor* (1978) (fig. 3), for example, McCarthy transformed familiar symbols of American domesticity and commodity culture into scatological matter, bodily fluids and sexual stimulants. Stethoscope around his neck, he performed a depraved medical exam on an armless, life-size female mannequin, methodically dousing her in ketchup, margarine, ground beef and moisturizing cream. Re-contextualized, these common household products were effectively alchemized into blood, lubricant, shit and semen. Rather than disguising the true identities of his materials, however, McCarthy emphasized them. They were taken straight from clearly labeled bottles, containers and shrink-wrapped packages, which remained front and center throughout the performance. Viewers were therefore stuck between readings, as substances continuously oscillated between condiment and gore, meat and excrement, lotion and ejaculate. A similar effect was produced by McCarthy’s violent behavior, such as when he hammered a screwdriver into the dummy’s mouth and pelvis, leaving jagged, gaping holes in her plastic body.

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<sup>11</sup> Paul McCarthy, interview with Linda Burnham, *High Performance* 8, no. 1 (1985): 42.

Obviously fake and utterly harmless, these acts nonetheless felt psychopathically abusive. One could not avoid being roused, as McCarthy simultaneously became a sadistic sex-murderer and a juvenile buffoon—his performance at once funny and sick, bogus and brutal, idiotic and disturbing. Typical of his work at this time, *My Doctor* was essentially an all-out assault on categories, on the ways in which things and behaviors are classified. Like Kelley, McCarthy has routinely placed representation and reality into direct conflict with each other, forcing the viewer into intellectual and emotional predicaments. One knows it's food, but can't help but be repulsed; one knows the violence is victimless, but can't help but be mortified.

Pettibon's oeuvre consists mainly of pen and ink drawings, produced individually and as parts of photocopied artist booklets, or "zines." These drawings adhere to a crude comic-like format, but abandon essential standards of the comic book—namely, sequential narrative and coherence between figure and text. Most typically, they consist of a single provocative image coupled with a polyphony of incongruous captions or quotes. The fragmentation that results effectively dislodges content, allowing for an open interplay of words and pictures. Pettibon's especially acerbic style of cultural commentary emerges from this clash of visual and verbal elements, culled from the artist's panoptic view of culture, both high and low, including film, television, music and sports, politics, literature, advertising and religion. Similar to Kelley and McCarthy, he manipulates meaning in ways that elicit eminently problematic responses. He provokes his audience only to pull the rug out from under it. Meanwhile, the artist's own standpoint remains frustratingly ambiguous throughout. Without a clear position with

which to either agree or disagree, viewers are stuck within Pettibon's paradoxes, left to negotiate them on their own.

An untitled drawing from 1986 (fig. 4) is exemplary. Here, a Christ-figure—long hair and beard, benevolent expression on his face—is portrayed in the format of a religious icon. Only the swastika tattoo between his eyes betrays his true identity: this is not Jesus, but cult leader and serial killer Charles Manson. The result is an irresolvable conflict between format and subject matter, between connotations embedded in the visual language and those associated with the infamous mass murderer.<sup>12</sup> This effect is akin to that produced by McCarthy's ketchup-and-meat massacres. Just as *My Doctor* transformed wholesome Americana into gruesome abominations, Pettibon's drawing elicits a conflation of opposites—in this case, pure good and pure evil. And, like both Kelley and McCarthy, Pettibon relies on the cultural fluency of his audience in order to generate such an outcome. The work's essential contradiction is a product of the meaning viewers instinctively place upon its components. Consequently, they are led into deriving their own uncomfortable parallels between Manson's cult following and Christ's. They are also compelled to confront the popular fascination with this killer and his crimes—Manson's exalted status as celebrity villain. "I AM YOUR REFLECTION, NOT YOUR OPPOSITE," reads the caption overhead. Like *Pay for Your Pleasure*, this

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<sup>12</sup> Charles Manson was a cult leader who claimed to be the incarnation of Jesus Christ. In 1969, he convinced members of his group, called "The Family," to commit a number of brutal murders, most famously that of movie actress Sharon Tate. The trail of Manson and his followers captivated the country, transforming him into an American anti-hero and cultural icon. In 1971, Manson was convicted of first degree murder for orchestrating the killings and remains incarcerated at California's Corcoran State Prison. For an account of the Manson crimes, trail and aftermath, see *Helter Skelter: The True Story of the Manson Murders*, by Vincent Bugliosi with Curt Gentry (Toronto, New York, London: Bantam Books, 1974).

drawing successfully preempts typical responses to the homicidal maniac—the complicity and condescension that underlie one’s contempt and curiosity. Pettibon drives the point home, blurring distinctions between miscreant and law-abider, between us and him.

Ultimately, Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon offer an especially effective mode of critique, one which avoids the inevitable pitfalls of ideological partisanship and idealism. Traditional political affiliations therefore do not apply to these artists, for really it is not their own opinions that are asserted. Nonetheless, they ravage convictions on the Left as well as the Right, treating them as mutually reinforcing sides of the same coin. It is thus inaccurate to describe their work as either liberal or conservative. While McCarthy openly violates restrictive taboos, for instance, his performances also unearth impious urges lurking within the human psyche—a problem for those who, in opposition to such taboos, blindly advocate the wholesale emancipation of desire. Likewise, while Kelley negates romanticized criminality by confronting it with the real thing, he attributes that romanticization to some of the most canonical artists and writers in Western history, to those often championed by conservative critics as the models for socially redemptive thought and practices.<sup>13</sup> To use Kelley’s installation as evidence against decadent culture would be to incriminate the likes of Plutarch, Giotto and Pope Paul III, whose quotes appear alongside—and in support of—those by De Sade, Artaud, Genet and Wilde.

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<sup>13</sup> The most prominent example of this cultural conservatism, and one that was contemporaneous to Kelley’s installation, is Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today’s Students* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987).

More profoundly, the slippages generated by the work of Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon destabilize the terms upon which some of society's most basic values and moral judgments are founded. Pettibon's drawing thus makes it difficult to cleanly dismiss or condemn the murderous Other, for he presents him as more closely related to the norm than one might think. All three artists reveal that what is held sacred can turn deviant, and vice versa, through simple shifts in context and perspective. When notions of good and bad, right and wrong, are so unstable that each can be easily twisted into its opposite, conventional politics cannot function. The work of Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon presents a more subtle and complex approach—one activated by audience response rather than polemical imposition.

This dissertation examines the art of these three artists. Focusing on a series of topics addressed by them, it identifies a common cultural politics underlying their work, one which allows for an unusually effective type of social commentary. This study is not intended to be comprehensive with regards to their entire oeuvres. Instead, it attempts to link their strategies of critique to broad shifts in perspective indicative of these artists' time period—to a particular *zeitgeist*. It must be acknowledged, however, that in pursuing that goal, this dissertation opens itself up to certain criticisms. For the most part, it takes the views of Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon—views implicit in their work, as well as in their writings and interview statements—at face value. One could thus argue that my methodology is itself uncritical; that is, it neglects to submit these artists' opinions to the type of dispassionate analysis that they themselves advocate. My study could also be seen as rather narrow, in that it prioritizes a social reading of their work over a purely art-historical analysis. I do not, however, intend to imply that Kelley,

McCarthy and Pettibon are free of precedents and influences. They do belong to a particular history of art—an alternative one that is certainly in need of more thorough examination. Yet, rather than place this work within an artistic lineage, I attempt to articulate these artists' unconventional approach to cultural politics, to map out their essential strategies. Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon were thus selected not because they are the only artists engaged in that approach, but because they offer especially poignant examples of it. Their work is also exceptional in its breadth of subject matter, in its focus on some of the most divisive cultural issues of the contemporary era. By articulating the ways in which these artists deal with such issues, I intend to offer a foundation for subsequent evaluations and critical reassessments. Viewing their work through the lenses of popular culture, sociology, gender studies, cultural anthropology and psychology, this dissertation primarily seeks to contextualize it within the social and political history of post-sixties America.

As such, my study is distinct from the extant literature on these artists. All three have had major museum retrospectives during the past decade (Kelley in 1993, McCarthy in 2000, and Pettibon in 1998), accompanied by sizeable exhibition catalogues.<sup>14</sup> Of these, Kelley's is the most extensive, with numerous short essays on a wide range of

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<sup>14</sup> "Mike Kelley," organized by the Whitney Museum of American Art (1993) and also appearing at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Modern Museet, Stockholm; "Paul McCarthy," organized by the New Museum of Contemporary Art (2000) and also appearing at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; "Raymond Pettibon," organized by The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago and the Philadelphia Museum of Art (1998), appearing at both venues, as well as at the Drawing Center, New York and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.

relevant topics, from his earliest work to his more recent endeavors.<sup>15</sup> Each is a reflection on a different theme or phase of his career, and together they offer a comprehensive overview of Kelley's oeuvre. The catalogue that accompanied McCarthy's exhibition is the most conventional of the three, with a survey of the artist's career by one of the show's curators and two additional essays—a Freudian analysis of McCarthy's use of the body and an assessment of a 1999 installation from an architectural perspective.<sup>16</sup> Pettibon's is the most unusual of the three. Conceived as a "reader," it compiles over sixty selections of writings by authors who have inspired the artist's work and from which he often borrows quotations.<sup>17</sup> Selected by Pettibon along with the book's editors, these texts—ranging from Saint Augustine to Mickey Spillane, from Ludwig Wittgenstein to Manson—form a fascinating anthology, providing a type of insight into the artist's outlook and working method that straight expository writing cannot. The book also contains five brief essays by contemporary critics and curators.

In addition to these catalogues, the scholarship on Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon has primarily come in the form of magazine articles, monographs and other exhibition-related publications. Whereas this body of work is quite substantial for mid-career artists, and much of it has been used as a basis for this dissertation, it almost universally considers each artist independently, with only the occasional nod to the links between

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<sup>15</sup> Elisabeth Sussman, et al, *Mike Kelley: Catholic Tastes* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993).

<sup>16</sup> Lisa Philips, Dan Cameron, Amelia Jones and Anthony Vidler, *Paul McCarthy* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 2000).

<sup>17</sup> Ann Temkin and Hamza Walker eds., *Raymond Pettibon: A Reader* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1998).

them. The few exceptions, meanwhile, tend to be exceedingly broad in scope. Of this latter group, the foremost example is Paul Schimmel's landmark exhibition and catalogue, *Helter Skelter: L.A. Art in the 1990s* (1992). This show, at the Temporary Contemporary of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, was largely responsible for propelling Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon, as well as others, from regional to national (and international) prominence. Yet, it also cast a wide net, featuring sixteen Southern California artists comparable because, according to Schimmel, their work "portrays the darker side of contemporary life—visions in which alienation, obsessions, dispossession, or perversity either dominate the landscape or form a disruptive undercurrent."<sup>18</sup> The catalogue further expanded this reach, juxtaposing the work of these artists with that of ten similarly somber L.A.-based authors and poets. This dissertation attempts to refine such groupings. Limited to three artists, it focuses on their uncommon approach to art making, which not only unifies them but also distinguishes them from those who may otherwise appear likeminded.

Meanwhile, this study situates the work of Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon within the history of the issues they engage, something that others have initiated, but which has as yet not been fully realized. In addition to the aforementioned exhibition catalogues, three recent monographs published by Phaidon Press as part of their "Contemporary Artists" series provide important bases for this contextualization. Offering the most extensive surveys of their careers, these books place them within larger social and cultural frameworks. In "Mr. McCarthy's Neighborhood" (1996), Ralph Rugoff relates

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<sup>18</sup> Paul Schimmel, *Helter Skelter: L.A. Art in the 1990s*, ed. Catherine Gudis (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1992), 17.

McCarthy's performances and videos not only to the history of art, but to contemporary film, television and other forms of mass media.<sup>19</sup> In "The Mike Kelleys" (1999), John C. Welchman sticks mostly to Kelley's relationship to his art historical predecessors and peers. Yet, Welchman effectively distinguishes the artist's methods from those of others, while identifying most of the major social and cultural themes present in his art.<sup>20</sup> Robert Storr's "'You Are What You Read': Words and Pictures by Raymond Pettibon" (2001) pays the most attention to social context, presenting Pettibon's art in terms of post-1960s American culture—high, middle and low.<sup>21</sup> Storr is also the one who most explicitly connects these artists together, noting that Pettibon's "sharp rejection of romanticism and impatience with credulity run through the work of many Los Angeles artists who emerged in the mid 1970s," among them Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy.<sup>22</sup>

The texts by Storr and Rugoff, along with additional related articles and catalogue essays by them, have supplied this dissertation with its most significant points of departure. Their methodologies have also been paradigmatic. The intellectual agility of these critic-curators—their capacity to shuttle between art history and the popular culture that both informs and is addressed by the work of Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon—enables them to tease out the essential issues at stake, while situating them within major

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<sup>19</sup> Ralph Rugoff, "Mr. McCarthy's Neighborhood" in *Paul McCarthy* (London: Phaidon Press, 1996), 32-87.

<sup>20</sup> John C. Welchman, "The Mike Kelleys" in *Mike Kelley* (London: Phaidon Press, 1999), 44-93.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Storr, "'You Are What You Read': Words and Pictures by Raymond Pettibon," in *Raymond Pettibon* (London: Phaidon Press, 2001), 34-73.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

social trends. They stand largely in opposition to scholars who have attempted to force these artists into preordained or rigidly exclusive histories of art. In “Raymond Pettibon: Return to Disorder and Disfiguration” (1998), for example, Benjamin Buchloh sees the artist’s drawings as embodying “the modernist credo of de-skilling”<sup>23</sup> To him, the interplay of image and text thoroughly negates communication, rather than reinvigorating it through a novel approach. Buchloh uses Pettibon’s work in order to advance his own critique of contemporary visual culture, but he neglects the actual internal dynamics of that work in order to do so. Similarly, Rosalind Krauss and Yves-Alain Bois’s exhibition catalogue, *Formless: A User’s Guide* (1996), concludes with an attempt to establish Kelley’s art as a faithful invocation of Georges Bataille’s notion of *l’informe*. Arguing that it is essentially an exercise in semiotics, they insist that “thematics” (i.e. content) is wholly irrelevant in Kelley’s work.<sup>24</sup> (In an especially curious passage, the authors claim that Kelley’s use of Bataille in *Pay for Your Pleasure* confirms the connection between the two—as if the installation was meant to affirm, rather than debunk, the philosopher’s quote.)

Describing their work either in strict neo-formalist terms or as illustrative of particular philosophical arguments, such accounts overlook—or explicitly deny—the specific cultural critiques offered by these artists. The more nuanced and flexible accounts by Rugoff and Storr expose the discrepancies between theory-based analyses

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<sup>23</sup> Benjamin Buchloh, “Raymond Pettibon: Return to Disorder and Disfiguration,” in *Raymond Pettibon: A Reader*, ed. Ann Temkin and Hamza Walker (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1998), 226.

<sup>24</sup> Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss, *Formless: A User’s Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997), 247-52.

and actual art practice, while providing a social perspective inaccessible to these overly hermetic conceptions of art. Storr's writings have been especially crucial, for not only does he position Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon in relation to their time period, he also identifies the key components of their artistic strategy—namely, grotesque contradiction, ambiguity and ambivalence.<sup>25</sup> This dissertation will, in essence, solidify and expand upon many of the bonds suggested by his summaries, situating the work of these artists within its greater historical, cultural and political context.

Chapter one focuses specifically on their engagements with music, an early and important factor in the development of each artist's approach. Whereas all three were involved with alternative music scenes during pivotal moments in their careers, and while they continue to perform in bands, these connections have not been sufficiently treated by the scholarship. In fact, they are barely mentioned at all. Not only are such links relevant, in many ways these artists' visual work is rooted in its aural counterparts and influences. Kelley and McCarthy were each associated with notable post-counterculture musical currents. In opposition to both the politicization of rock-and roll in the 1960s and its ensuing de-politicization in the early 1970s, these bands employed methods of cultural critique that would come to characterize Kelley and McCarthy's art overall. A few years later, Pettibon responded to a different trend: the mid-to-late-seventies re-politicization of popular music by the punk movement and its various derivations. Initially involved with one such variant, Pettibon ultimately rejected it, arriving at tactics similar to those of Kelley, McCarthy and their musical cohorts. The approach of all three

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<sup>25</sup> In addition to Storr's "You Are What You Read," see, for example, "Eye Infection," 13-25.

artists toward mainstream culture can thus be distilled from their music, as well as from their relationships to that of others—the bands that influenced them and those against which they reacted.

Subsequent chapters examine the ways in which these artists apply this approach to specific issues. Arranged thematically, each considers a different area targeted by their work. Chapter two addresses the subject of sex. Pettibon, Kelley and McCarthy effectively disrupt deep-seated sexual norms and ideals by producing unnerving combinations of repulsion and desire, the natural and the unnatural. Yet, their assaults are distinct from the “sexual revolution” championed by progressives of the 1960s and 70s. Rather than simply advocating a complete liberation from the forces of repression, they attack the very terms of the debate, the fundamental presumptions and mores shared by both progressive sexual revolutionaries and puritan sexual reactionaries. Tracing the history of that debate, this chapter positions these artists in relation to new perspectives on sex emerging in mid-1970s and 80s. Reflecting such shifts, their work repudiates the view—long maintained by both the Right and the Left—of sex as a politically subversive act, while offering a more effective approach to the topic.

Chapter three focuses on gender, drawing distinctions and connections between these artists’ work and the discourses of the 1970s, 80s and 90s. As with their treatment of sex, Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon offer discomfiting and eminently problematic gender hybrids, which reveal underlying similarities between apparently conflicting views, along with inconsistencies on all sides. Their work is unusual in its engagement with masculinity as well as femininity. Rather than pitting one against the other, it destabilizes both, presenting them as overly rigid and fundamentally artificial categories

of identity. The primary target here is essentialism—the attempt to reduce gender to a stable set of qualities—whether it be a monolithic notion of femininity to either celebrate or subjugate, or a similarly reductive notion of masculinity to attack or advance. They thus complicate a range of contemporary feminist approaches, while also invalidating the reaffirmations of patriarchy unleashed in reaction. Their work implies a more fluid and socially constructed conception of gender, one which denies the possibility of a fixed self, whether male or female.

Chapter four moves beyond identity politics, expanding the discussion to these artists' recurring and particularly noteworthy focus on youth. Here, they explicitly target the 1960s and early 70s counterculture, founded upon a veneration of youth. As envisioned by the work of Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon, however, adolescence is a time of confusion and contradiction, rather than insight and progressivism. Rejecting the belief in youthful virtue, they subvert the fundamental doctrine of the counterculture movement, as well as that of its later reincarnations. Yet, this work also has broader significance, undermining a particularly American “cult of childhood,” rooted in the country's earliest history and which has continued to inform its cultural politics. This type of primitivism is based upon a simple opposition between the natural, pure child and an artificial and corrupt culture. Both liberals and conservatives have traditionally adhered to this mythic polarity, spinning it in different directions to fit their agendas. Whether a source of reform or a cause for restriction, the innocent child has been taken as a given. In place of this ideal, Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon offer more frank representations, in which childhood is not only complex, but often riddled by eroticism, violent urges and other so-called perversities. Their work targets the often traumatic

process of social conditioning, meant to suppress such “abnormalities” and thus force children to conform to constructed standards of normalcy. By de-naturalizing such standards, these artists rupture fundamental conventions upon which the politics of youth, sex, gender and identity in general have been based.

The conclusion picks up on this idea, establishing this youth-oriented work as the culmination of their oeuvres overall. Tying the previous chapters together, it identifies at the core of their art a demystified notion of human nature and its relationship to culture. Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon dislocate the civilizing processes designed to negotiate between these two supposed antinomies. Confounding some of society’s most essential norms, their work counteracts their reification. Yet, it also short-circuits conventional attempts to resist those norms, exposing ordinary dissent as simply another form of compliance. In contrast to both, these artists offer a novel strategy of critique. Reflecting their distinctly post-sixties points of view, it is an approach set largely in opposition to deficient cultural discourses of the previous generation.

Crystallizing between the mid-1970s and early 1980s, this strategy stands in stark contrast to the politics of fixed causes and steadfast partisanship. In both intent and effect, it is distinct from most activist or identity-based art of the contemporary era. Largely rooted in the American counterculture in the late-sixties and early-seventies, such consciousness-raising work often relied upon the polemical terms dislodged by Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon. With her series of photomontages, *Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful* (1967–72) (fig. 5), for example, Martha Rosler attempted to transport the Vietnam War into the bourgeois home. The objective was to rouse middle-class Americans out of complacency by exposing the dichotomy between their own

comfortable existence and the atrocities happening simultaneously in Southeast Asia. Likewise, Hans Haacke's Guggenheim Museum installation, *Shapolsky et al Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time System, as of May 1, 1971* (1971) (fig. 6), documented the private investments of a shady real estate firm, suggesting a link between art establishments and capitalist exploitation. An array of feminist artists similarly attempted to subvert patriarchal authority and institutions. Judy Chicago's notorious *Red Flag* (1971) (fig. 7), for instance, is a close-up photolithograph of the artist pulling a bright red bloody tampon from her vagina. Like many feminists working at this time, Chicago recast the female body—typically the object of male domination—into a powerfully aggressive force, sexual and otherwise.

Of course, these are just a few of the innumerable examples of contemporary “political” art; yet they are representative. Without resorting to over-generalization or wholesale dismissal, one could argue that such work maintains a traditional approach to discourse. Whether anti-war, anti-institutional or anti-sexist, it is the product of artists assuming authoritative positions, from which they attempt to enlighten their viewers with clearly articulated arguments. Such art may be confrontational and controversial, but it is also polemical and idealistic, and therefore rather conventional. The critical approach employed by Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon is distinct not only from that of the aforementioned work, but from the student movement that inspired it—that is, from the type of dissent which culminated with the American counterculture. Formed in the immediate aftermath of that movement, their outlooks were born of bitter disenchantment. In contrast to their activist peers, these artists' work marks a renunciation of sixties idealism. In fact, much of it is aimed directly at what they deemed

to be the misguided values, misdirected acts and misinformed motives of their predecessors.

The cover of Raymond Pettibon's 1984 zine, *Tripping Corpse Four* (fig. 8), for example, features a frenzied longhair brandishing bloody knives and stabbing wildly at an unseen victim. A pithy caption is all that's offered to justify the vicious scene:

“THIS IS 1968, NOT 1967.”

As though once that chronological threshold was crossed, such ferocious acts of brutality were acceptable, even sensible. After 1968, nothing was the same. Pettibon's drawing transforms the hippie—agent of the Age of Aquarius—into an envoy of unbridled and indiscriminate violence. The work is an unforgiving commentary on how quickly the utopian aspirations of the counterculture actually devolved into dystopian reality, and on how readily the peace-and-love generation abandoned what they had claimed to be eternal virtues. Responding to this hypocrisy, Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon exchange utopianism for an assault on ideological certainty itself, on the reductive thinking that perpetuates such defunct cultural ideals. In fact, they see the sixties counterculture as not only a failed attempt at revolution, but as a primary regenerator—and casualty—of this reductivism. In response, their art is not only devoid of sanctimonious pronouncements, but openly hostile towards them.

Pettibon's drawing facetiously affixes an exact date to this moment of disillusionment. Typically, though, the sixties is less a chronological designation for these artists than a frame of mind—a tendency toward certain perceptions, perspectives and procedures. To consider the period as such is arguably to schematize what was in fact a multifaceted and complicated time. To simply claim that Pettibon, Kelley and

McCarthy criticize the sixties implies a simplified notion of the epoch as the target of their critiques. Their work, however, suggests an awareness of this tendency to reduce the decade to a monolithic essence, beginning in its immediate aftermath and continuing to the present day. Indeed, it targets that very tendency. Their assaults are directed as much at “the sixties”—a mythology rapidly impressed into the public’s imagination—than at actual events and phenomena.

By the mid-1970s, the mythologization of the era was in full swing; by the 1980s and 90s, that mythology was not only well-established, but entrenched. The period was seen by baby-boomers on the Left as a nostalgic time of sit-ins, teach-ins and love-ins, when motives were pure, sex was safe and music was groovy. This romanticized image—condensed to a popular style of long hair, beads and tie-dyed clothing—was, in Pettibon’s terms, decidedly more 1967 than 1968. Meanwhile, the epoch was repackaged by conservatives to advance a fundamentally reactionary agenda. Turning “the sixties” into an epithet, they characterized it as the source of a continuing cultural descent. By the early 1980s, this had become the dominant account of the period, nourishing the Right’s increasingly powerful grip on American politics. The embodiment of this perspective was Ronald Reagan, whose positions on everything from the economy to social programs and education relied upon a pseudo-historical trajectory that effectively delegitimized American history since the 1950s. The upheavals of the sixties were blamed for a dramatic seventies decline, which thus necessitated an eighties rebirth, a new “Morning in America,” a recuperation of moral stability and responsibility. Reagan’s condemnation of the sixties thus represented a different but equally romantic point of view, one based on a nostalgia for a bygone era—the lost “normalcy” of the fifties. As

James Combs points out in *The Reagan Range: The Nostalgia Myth in American Politics* (1993), “he had come to political power as a reaction against the reforms and innovations of the 1960s and as a spokesman for a coalition that won the Presidency in the wake of the pessimism and exhaustion of the 1970s.”<sup>26</sup> To self-appointed guardians of morality, the dissolution of the nuclear family and the rise of sexual promiscuity, pornography and punk rock were symptoms of a cultural decay that began in the sixties. In response, eighties conservatives sought to turn back the clock as a way to redeem history, to give it a happier ending. “It was,” Combs concludes, “as if the 1960s and 1970s, the civil rights movement, Vietnam, Watergate, [and] the sexual revolution...had not, or perhaps should not, have happened.”<sup>27</sup>

This regressivism was no less delusional than the progressivism it sought to counteract. Both movements were idealistic, and both were steeped in nostalgia.<sup>28</sup> Nonetheless, the polarization between pro-sixties liberalism and anti-sixties conservatism has obstructed American politics ever since the Reagan revolution. In his essay, “A Tale of Two Reactions” (1998), Mark Lilla outlines the ongoing problems of this overly rigid opposition. The Right, he explains, continues to lambaste the sixties, blaming the era for a decline of public authority, the fragility of the American family and an abandonment of individual morality. Meanwhile, the Left clings to its antiquated tactics, calling for a

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<sup>26</sup> James Combs, *The Reagan Range: The Nostalgia Myth in American Politics* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1993), 44.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>28</sup> For example, counterculture pleas to return to simple life were later recycled by Reaganites, who emphasized good honest work, old fashioned common sense and small-town American family values. Though typically cast as antitheses, the sixties and its eighties backlash exhibited parallel atavistic impulses (*Ibid.*, 135).

return to sixties-type social programs and activism without conceding previous failures. Though Lilla mostly ascribes to the conservative position, he argues that the real problem is endemic to both sides. Neither acknowledges that the counterculture and the Reagan movement were actually generated by “the same forces of democratic individualism,” that each was “an extension of the same utopian vision.”<sup>29</sup> More than anything, both so-called revolutions “have proved complementary, not contradictory, events.”<sup>30</sup> Pettibon himself made a very similar point in a recent interview:

The current radical right, the reigning power of now, the neo-conservatives—that all comes from a very left wing position. Almost all those guys were at one time the opposite. And so it’s hard to take that sort of thing seriously if you can see it from any historical distance.<sup>31</sup>

As Lilla concludes, the insistent backward-looking at illusory notions of the sixties may make for successful campaigning, but it has stunted American politics, precluding productive dialogue on the Right and the Left.

Whether impugned or affirmed, “the sixties” has thus been a central frame of reference for much of the cultural discourse since the 1980s. Though opposing interpretations have been offered, all sides seem to concur that the period was pivotal, that something significant had changed during that time, that indeed, after 1968, nothing was the same. Yet, as evidenced by Lilla’s essay, the eighties and nineties were also a time of reevaluation—both of the era itself and of subsequent assessments of it. The

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<sup>29</sup> Mark Lilla, “A Tale of Two Reactions,” *The New York Review of Books* 45, no. 8 (May 14, 1998), <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/857>.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Raymond Pettibon, interview with Art:21 (2003), <http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/pettibon/clip2.html>.

anthology *The 60s Without Apology* (1984) was an early attempt at a more balanced perspective. The ambivalence of title itself shows how prescriptive the anti-sixties position had become by that time. In the book's introduction, the editors note this recent "trashing of the 60s"—implied in the Right's promotion of family values and a return of "excellence" to public schools, the pervasiveness of anti-feminist, anti-gay and anti-union rhetoric, various attempts to dismantle the welfare state, and the general denunciation of "permissiveness."<sup>32</sup> For these editors, however, such admonitions were actually less disturbing than "the tendency of the Left to respond in essentially defensive and reactive ways."<sup>33</sup> Rather than self-critique and the acknowledgement of political and ideological errors, defenders of the sixties chose "unbound, unrepentant reaffirmation."<sup>34</sup>

In its more measured approach to the period, the anthology was meant to accomplish from the Left what Lilla's essay would later try to do from the Right. For both, the objective was to neither romanticize the achievements of the era nor continue to bemoan its blunders. Hence, *The 60s Without Apology* is as much a reconsideration of liberal positions as it is an attempt to resist conservative sixties-bashing. As Fredric Jameson points out in his contribution, "Periodizing the 60s" (1984), "nostalgic commemoration of the glories of the 60s or abject public confession of the decade's many failures and missed opportunities are two errors which cannot be avoided by some

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<sup>32</sup> Sonhya Sayres, Anders Stephanson, Stanley Aronowitz, Fredric Jameson, eds., *The 60s Without Apology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 8.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 9.

middle path that threads its way in between.”<sup>35</sup> It is therefore not just a question of finding the “true” sixties to replace previous accounts—no new “periodization,” as Jameson puts it. Instead, the goal is to mix things up, complicate matters, to show that “its opportunities and failures were inextricably intertwined.”<sup>36</sup>

It is with this in mind that the full effect of Pettibon’s drawing can be grasped. Whereas it locates an historical moment of disillusionment, the work’s humor stems from its rather absurd hair-splitting of dates—as though the distinction between one year and the next can actually explain the horrific scene pictured in the work. Pettibon’s differentiation between 1967 and 1968 identifies a change in attitude, but deliberately falls short of truly explaining that change. The drawing’s subject is both the failed utopianism of the sixties and its later conceptualization—the attempts by both the Right and the Left to periodize it, to determine when exactly things turned sour. Simultaneously a biting satire of counterculture idealism and a caricature of the historicization of that idealism, it represents a quintessentially post-sixties view of the 1960s.

Published the same year as *The 60s Without Apology*, Pettibon’s drawing belongs to this moment of reassessment, as do a range of similarly informed works by Kelley and McCarthy. For these artists, however, a dispassionate approach did not translate into any less virulent critiques. On the contrary, it allowed for ruthless attacks in all directions. Their evaluations of the sixties are caustic, but calculated to avoid ideological hazards.

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<sup>35</sup> Fredric Jameson, “Periodizing the 60s” in *The 60s Without Apology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 178.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

Circumventing a political situation bogged down by sixties-isms, Pettibon, Kelley and McCarthy offer a more productive strategy. While attacking the rhetoric of that period, they also return to it a complexity and nuance that had been glossed over and smoothed out by decades of mythologizing.

The oldest of the three, McCarthy is technically a member of the counterculture generation.<sup>37</sup> However, while he generally avoids dealing with the subject directly, threads of anti-sixties sentiment can be traced throughout his work, which systematically dismantles many of the core principles promulgated during that time. As will be discussed in later chapters, sculptural installations such as *The Garden* (1991-92) (fig. 9) caricature the veneration of nature and the land, along with idealistic notions of liberated sexuality—both primary tenets of countercultural politics. Earlier works satirize the histrionics of political activism itself. In *Political Disturbance* (1976) (fig. 10), for example, McCarthy performed a communication malfunction, a breakdown of public discourse. Sprawled out in the stairwell of the Biltmore Hotel in Los Angeles, he wore plastic crucifixes and a Yasser Arafat mask. As a crowd of guests gathered and hotel managers threatened to call the police, McCarthy slathered himself and a bunch of baby dolls in ketchup, raw hamburger meat and other squishy food products, singing and groaning while Arabic music blared from a loudspeaker. He later described the response:

They felt it was obscene. They also questioned its content...that I was dressed as an Arab. They didn't know exactly what that meant or what kind of statement I was making. They thought it was in bad taste. It was confusing. They didn't know whether I was pro-Arab or not.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> McCarthy was born in 1945.

<sup>38</sup> Paul McCarthy, quoted in “Performance Interruptus: Interview with Paul McCarthy,” interview with Linda Burnham and Richard Newton, *High Performance* 1, no. 2 (June

As the title suggests, this performance was apparently “political” and clearly a “disturbance,” yet it was impossible to say what its point was. Of course, that *was* the point: the artist intended to stupefy rather than make a definitive statement. Unlike the sit-ins, protest marches and demonstrations of the previous era, he sought not to raise consciousness, but to muddle it.

As members of the following generation, Kelley and Pettibon confront the sixties more directly. Inheriting its vestigial disillusionment without having participated in its reverie, both treat the period with open acrimony—though, again, from a very different perspective than that of conservative sixties-bashers. Kelley comments on the in-between position of his particular age group, explaining that he hit adolescence just as the counterculture was waning:

I came of age at the tail end of the 1960s, a period of immense social change and unrest in America. I was fourteen in 1968, conscious enough to feel a part of the general social turmoil, too young to be a real hippie, but just old enough to be eligible for the Vietnam draft...I didn't feel connected in any way to my family, to my country, or to reality for that matter: the world seemed to me a media façade, and all history a fiction—a pack of lies.<sup>39</sup>

It was a moment in which the counterculture was rapidly being commercialized, co-opted by the mainstream media, and generally exposed as futile—if not an outright farce.

Three years Kelley's junior, Pettibon is also representative of this transitional phase, of what Storr refers to as a “compassless generation.”<sup>40</sup> Though McCarthy's work reflects a

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1978): 9.

<sup>39</sup> Mike Kelley, “Cross-Gender/Cross-Genre” (1999), reprinted in *Foul Perfection: Essays and Criticism*, by Mike Kelley, ed. John C. Welchman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 94.

<sup>40</sup> Storr, ““You Are What You Read,”” 40.

divide between the quixotic dream of the past and the scornful reality of the present, he does not explicitly name the sixties as his target. Possibly because they are younger, however, and therefore at a greater remove from the period, Kelley and Pettibon tackle sixties motifs head-on, assailing not only the values of the era, but its primary forms, languages and conventions.

In 1987, Kelley produced a set of handmade felt banners, part of his “Half a Man” series. Done a year before *Pay for Your Pleasure* and initially exhibited alongside that installation,<sup>41</sup> these works make reference to a popular aesthetic introduced in the 1960s by the Catholic Church, which had been looking to make religion relevant to a new generation of young people.<sup>42</sup> Specifically, Kelley’s banners evoke the polychrome prints of Sister Mary Corita Kent, who led this endeavor by combining the forms of advertising and modernist art with basic religious themes of charity, hope, kindness, peace and love.<sup>43</sup> Her *I in Daisy* (1969) (fig. 11), for example, declares that “Hope is believing that there has to be an ‘I’ in daisy.” Raised as a catholic, Kelley had intimate knowledge of this type of work, even claiming that, along with “psychedelic posters, left-wing graphics, and underground comics,” Corita Kent’s images “were the first things I

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<sup>41</sup> Both were first shown as part of the exhibition “Three Projects: Half a Man, From My Institution to Yours, Pay for Your Pleasures,” at the Renaissance Center at the University of Chicago, May 4 – June 30, 1988.

<sup>42</sup> Singerman, 13.

<sup>43</sup> John Miller, “The Mortification of the Sign: Mike Kelley’s Felt Banners,” in *Three Projects*, 16.

saw and thought of as art.”<sup>44</sup> His own banners elicit an examination of the ways in which such aesthetics are exploited on behalf of ideological agendas.

In *Trash Picker* (fig. 12), hand-cut letters sit upon a cheery, multicolored pattern of orange, pink and red. “I AM USELESS TO THE CULTURE,” it announces, “BUT GOD LOVES ME.” A crude distillation of countless religious proverbs, the banner openly mocks Corita Kent’s feel-good flyers and inspirational posters. Kelley strips the euphemisms, poetic flourishes and puns from these banal catechisms, offering his own deliberately artless version. With deadpan humor, he reduces a fundamentally reductive format to its bare essence, delivering a ham-fisted affirmation of faith that is emphatically unsatisfying. Using first-person pronouns, Kelley converts Corita Kent’s convention into the private confession of a lowly “Trash Picker,” whose proud assertion—really just a feeble reiteration of her stale pieties—comes off as laughably dim-witted. Yet, seeing Kelley’s banner as cynical is to miss the point, for the snide insincerity of his parody exposes the superficiality, and ultimate inadequacy, of its original sixties referent. The work implies that it is the simplification of life’s complexities to such vapid homilies—shrouded in the pseudo-innocence and saccharin sweetness of Corita Kent’s bubbly visual style—that constitutes the truly cynical enterprise.

In other felt-banner works, Kelley expands this critique to the counterculture itself, which in the later sixties adopted Corita Kent’s down-home aesthetic to convey a more general idealism. Connoting grassroots activism, democratic values and anti-institutional dissent, it was especially suited to the movement’s penchant for

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<sup>44</sup> Mike Kelley, interviewed by John Miller, Los Angeles, March 21, 1991, in *Mike Kelley*, ed. William Bartman and Miyoshi Barosh (New York: Art Resources Transfer Press, 1992), 36.

sloganeering—to “the decade’s decal dialogue,” as historian Benjamin De Mott put it in 1969.<sup>45</sup> The promoters of the Woodstock Music and Art Fair thus employed that aesthetic to advertise “Three Days of Peace and Music” (fig. 13). As artist and critic John Miller points out in “The Mortification of the Sign” (1988), Kelley couples the associations attached to this sixties style with those of felt itself, “an embarrassingly humble, even effeminate, craft material...whose very name even puns on the idea of sensation and sensitivity, a pathetically (bathetically?) compassionate substance to be dyed with colors naïve and bright.”<sup>46</sup> As a series of declaratory signs drained of any meaningful message, Kelley’s banners transform a format originally prized for its clarity and sure-footed idealism into something strangely equivocal and discomforting.

These works include blatantly satirical alterations, such as *Heart and Flower* (1987) (fig. 14), whose valentine-patterned border surrounds a red-felt blotch that looks less like a blossom and more like a pool of splattered blood. Like Pettibon’s maniacal hippie, the work conflates flower-power with butchery. Many of the banners, however, offer more oblique caricatures of sixties themes. *The Escaped Bird* (1987) (fig. 15), for example, presents a silhouetted dove bracketed by the word “Joy” above and its mirror-image below. Both the hand-cut font and the ornithic icon of peace derive from counterculture graphics, which by 1987 had been long sapped of any political potency.

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<sup>45</sup> Benjamin De Mott, “The Sixties: A Cultural Revolution” (1969), reprinted in *The Cult of Youth in Middle-Class America*, ed. Richard L. Rapson (Lexington, MA, Toronto and London: D.C. Heath and Company, 1971), 105.

<sup>46</sup> Miller, “The Mortification of the Sign,” 19. Miller also points out that, while he is not the first artist to use the material, Kelley’s felt is not valorized as in the earlier work of Joseph Beuys and Robert Morris. Instead, it is employed to an opposite effect—as a clichéd and antiquated substance, deceptively invested with emotional weight.

(Might this actually be the significance of the work's title—an allusion to the obsolescence of the dove symbol?) In fact, this body of work coincides with the co-optation of this sixties aesthetic by the institutional forces it originally intended to subvert. In 1985, for example, the post office released its “LOVE” stamp, designed by Corita Kent herself. It quickly became one of the most popular stamps in postal history, with over 700 million sold.<sup>47</sup> In a text accompanying his 1986 performance, *Plato's Cave, Rothko's Chapel, Lincoln's Profile*, Kelley sarcastically comments on this phenomenon and its relationship to his own project:

We are painting posters and cutting banners out of felt. Sister Mary Corita is our model and we are so glad because she has finally left the convent. She is doing nondenominational work, now we all have access to the joy of her images. The United States government itself has just issued a stamp with her design on it. It says “LOVE” in the dribbling paint of populism. A 22 cent manifesto on the separation of church and state has just been released. Oh happy day—the philatelists have been waiting for this.<sup>48</sup>

In *The Escaped Bird*, Kelley has paired down the counterculture catchphrase so severely that its components simply float there without any context, without any deeper point or significance. Hippie feel-good lingo and style are thus hollowed out, becoming nothing but pure façade. As a political slogan, “Joy”—like “Love”—is hopelessly inadequate; as political signage, *The Escaped Bird* fails miserably.

Whether meaning is drained or discombobulated, what remains in these banners are only the empty clichés themselves, whose vacuity is amplified by their antiquated graphic design. With their compounded clashes of content and form, these works are

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<sup>47</sup> <http://www.postalmuseum.si.edu/artofthestamp/index.html>.

<sup>48</sup> Mike Kelley, *Plato's Cave, Rothko's Chapel, Lincoln's Profile* (Venice, CA: New City Editions, in association with Artists Space, NY, 1986), 85.

analogous to McCarthy's condiment carnages and beef bacchanalias, as well as to Pettibon's Manson icon. And as with the former's *Political Disturbance* performance, Kelley's frustratingly incoherent banners caricature the rhetoric of activist politics. Deconstructing the visual and verbal languages of sixties-type sloganeering—the intimated authenticity and folk-art honesty of its simplified prose and homespun aesthetic—Kelley reveals it to be nothing more than obsolete convention.

Pettibon's ongoing *Tripping Corpse* series offer similar attacks on counterculture values. Whereas Kelley leaves things ambiguous, however, Pettibon goes straight for the jugular. The 1981 inaugural installment—subtitled the “Special Sickedelic Issue”—includes among its drawings a remake of Allen Ginsberg's poem, *Howl* (1956), celebrated throughout the sixties as a kind of counterculture mantra.<sup>49</sup> Pettibon's version twists the original into a biting parody of the era, recasting Ginsberg's “angelheaded hipsters” into “dusted hippies...who saw Blake in the Safeway [supermarket], but lost him in the fruit section.”<sup>50</sup> As Storr puts it in “You are What You Read” (2001), “Pettibon careens through Ginsberg's text in ever-wider curves, side-swiping Bohemian myths and New Age shibboleths as if they were stalled junkers and late-model gas-guzzlers.”<sup>51</sup>

This is, in fact, the core strategy of the series overall. Decidedly dystopian, his vision of the period is harrowing, his drawings caustic, cruel and unequivocally damning.

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<sup>49</sup> Allen Ginsberg, “Howl,” in *Howl and Other Poems*, intro. William Carlos Williams (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1956), 9-26.

<sup>50</sup> Raymond Pettibon, “Psychedelic Translation of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*,” *Tripping Corpse* (1981), reprinted in Phaidon, 92-95.

<sup>51</sup> Storr, ““You Are What You Read,”” 34-35.

At once hilarious and disconcerting, Pettibon's scornful scenes reshape hippie peace and love into brutal bloodbaths of murder, suicide and necrophilia—presented as the inadvertent culminations of counterculture delusion. Stripped bare, the sixties halcyon dream is converted into a sinister nightmare, one which reflects the acute sense of disillusionment inherited by succeeding generations, his own first among them.

The *Tripping Corpse* zines sardonically document this dreary descent into darkness. The murderous hippie who recalls that “This is 1968, not 1967” adorns the cover of *Tripping Corpse Four* (1984), a zine which concludes with a counterpart to this knife-wielding bohemian (fig. 16). Here, a semi-nude black woman hangs from a noose, “LOVE” and a peace symbol tattooed to her body. “Took LSD for the first time” explains the anonymous narrator—another wry allusion to the irrevocable passage from innocence to experience. It is this late-sixties letdown that constitutes the primary theme of the series. In *Tripping Corpse Twelve* (1990) (fig. 17), a wild-eyed hippie interrupts his butchering of a naked female corpse to explain, “It wasn’t like this at all at first. It was beautiful last week, when we started this commune.” Below the scene, a collaged newspaper clipping reads “But as saith the poet, ‘The Times They Are A-Changin’”—a reference to the 1964 Bob Dylan anthem.<sup>52</sup> Yet, surely when Dylan warned parents that “your sons and your daughters are beyond your command,” this was not what he had in mind. By recontextualizing the song’s hopeful celebration of changing ideals, Pettibon transforms it into another scathing satire on how quickly those ideals soured—a

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<sup>52</sup> Bob Dylan, “The Times They Are A-Changin’,” on *The Times They Are A-Changin’* (Columbia Records, 1964).

phenomenon echoed by the hippie whose commune apparently degraded from peaceful coexistence to murderous violence in just a week's time.

Once again, however, it is important not to see these critiques as simply replacing one ideological point of view with another. "Among the essential ambiguities of Pettibon's work," Storr explains, "is the degree to which his send-up of 1960s sweetness-and-light occasionally echoes the resentful put-downs of rednecks and 'hippie-bashing' conservatives."<sup>53</sup> Indeed, such distinctions can at times be hard to discern. Yet, Storr makes clear that

Pettibon's flirtation with the dark side is not simply preparation for a moral he and his readers have agreed upon in advance, much less a missionary excursion among the benighted. Rather it is art made in recognition of the pull that all reductionist thinking exerts by an artist who also knows that caricature, balanced between summary and description and ridicule, is a reductionist form *par excellence*.<sup>54</sup>

Like Kelley's banners, Pettibon's drawings mock sixties-era reductivist thinking by reducing it even further, essentially subjecting it to its own strategy. However, as Storr implies, Pettibon targets regressive positions as well, his images satisfying the most extreme prophesies of anti-sixties alarmists and scaremongers—those who see it as having ushered in an age of apathy, excess and amorality—to such an outrageous degree that they become ridiculous. These scenes of violent, value-less hippies thus operate as double-caricatures, parodying the counterculture and the reactionary vilification of it simultaneously. Composed entirely of clichés, Pettibon's drawings effectively expose the limitations of both sides of the argument.

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<sup>53</sup> Storr, "You Are What You Read," 43.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

Most works by Pettibon, Kelley and McCarthy do not address the sixties as pointedly as these do. Underlying them all, however, is a rejection of counterculture-style politics and its subsequent perpetuations and reactions. In contrast to their more idealistic peers and predecessors, these artists prefer to complicate matters rather than preach false solutions. As Pettibon has put it:

I don't think I have the power in art to make a difference anyway—to remake anyone to the way I think they should be, which is something I don't believe in the first place... Politics appears all the time in my work, but it's...represented from multiple points of view: the democracy of split personalities.<sup>55</sup>

Shared by all three, this disillusioned point of view informs their approach to a variety of subjects, many of which will be addressed in chapters to follow. Indeed, it is the basis of their gambit. By circumventing ideological predilections, the work of Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon can be neither easily dismissed nor directly disputed. Though they destabilize some of Western culture's most entrenched ideals and norms, these artists deflect culpability onto viewers, who, betrayed by their own beliefs, values and expectations, cannot point fingers without simultaneously incriminating themselves.

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<sup>55</sup> Raymond Pettibon, "A Conversation with Raymond Pettibon," interview with Michelle Plochere, *Artweek* (February 6, 1992): 20.

## CHAPTER ONE

### THE NOISE OF ART: A PRELUDE IN PERVERSITY

Little girl and little boy  
That's the one for me, you prick!

If it could be said to have a chorus, this would be it. Yet, really it's a stretch to call the accompanying cacophony a song, let alone identify a chorus. Titled "That's My Baby" (track 1) it appears on *Skin of Flesh All Mighty!*, the 1997 release by Gobbler, a band whose members include both McCarthy and Kelley.<sup>1</sup> Inevitably, the subject of the piece transforms its generic pop-tune title into something far more sinister. A pedophilic love ballad, it concludes with the seemingly endless repetition of this lyric by McCarthy's manic, digitally distorted voice.

Meandering, muddled and profane, "That's My Baby" is typical of the live performances and studio outtakes that make up *Skin of Flesh All Mighty!* Combining improvisational noise-making with ritualistic drumming, these headache-inducing recordings swing between the eerily mesmerizing and the riotously comedic. Peppered by guttural groans, whoops, cries and maniacal laughter, they are ridiculous, yet

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<sup>1</sup> Gobbler, *Skin of Flesh All Mighty!* (Malibu, CA: Compound Annex, 1997). Gobbler consists of Art Byington, Cameron Jamie and Dave Muller, as well as McCarthy and Kelley.

emotionally jarring. The sound is lo-tech and high-tech, primitive and futuristic, with layers of screechy feedback coupled with lyrics that are disturbing and downright asinine at the same time. In “Hey! Ho!” (track 2) a single nonsensical line—“circumcision, nightmare, the gobbler!”—is repeated over an incoherent reverberation of shouts and echoes. “Rock-A-Paully” (track 3) commences with an uncharacteristically popish riff, only to quickly deteriorate into a mess of monstrous mumbles and arrhythmic drum-pounding. “The Load” (track 4) is an deliberately dreadful cover of The Band’s 1968 classic, “The Weight,” whose well-known chorus—“take a load off Annie, take a load for free”—only emerges in the last minute and a half of an otherwise unintelligible eight-minute ululation.<sup>2</sup> Together, these songs constitute an all-out annihilation of pop-music form.

Such dissonancies are descendents of a distinct musical countercurrent. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, certain bands lashed out against the pomposity and pretentiousness of their peers, contesting the then-prevalent belief in rock-and-roll as a generator of social and political change. These groups did not, however, simply avoid an engagement with contemporary issues. Rather, they confronted cultural conventions head-on, though from a wholly different perspective than that of their counterculture contemporaries, who they considered part of the problem. Eschewing romanticisms of any kind, they offered scurrility, stupidity and humor as correctives to the self-seriousness of sixties rock, exchanging piety for vulgarity, artiness for deliberate clumsiness. What resulted was a refreshing type of experimental music, an alternative movement inhabiting a markedly in-between position—distinct from both mainstream

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<sup>2</sup> “The Weight” appears on The Band’s *Music From Big Pink* (Capitol Records, 1968).

trends and the ambitions of avant-garde musicians who, despite their unorthodoxy, were situated firmly within the higher-brow realms of jazz or classical music. Decidedly lowbrow, these artists operated from within rock-and-roll itself. Impious to the core, their work assailed both conventional pop music and the abundance of bands that cultivated a rebellious image, but which unselfconsciously conformed to established standards. They stood in opposition to an quixotic generation bent on establishing rock-and-roll as an eminently rebellious art form.

Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon are each linked—conceptually and aesthetically, as visual artists and as musicians—to this late-sixties and early-seventies countercurrent. All three have played and continue to play in bands that employ noise and humor in order to shred rock music norms. All three spent their formative years as part of scenes known for dismantling distinctions between music and visual art. As a member of Destroy All Monsters, a seminal mid-seventies band in the Detroit area, Kelley initially considered himself a musician first and an artist second. McCarthy has been interested in experimental music since his student days, and was involved with a number of alternative, Los Angeles-based bands throughout the 1970s. Pettibon was closely affiliated with a somewhat later and more popular variety of L.A. music, one which emerged toward the end of the decade. Like Kelley and McCarthy, his attitude toward both art and music was affected by that scene; but unlike the other two, it was also shaped by an acute reaction against it.

Despite the impact of such ties on these artists, scant critical attention has been paid to them. Southern California music is routinely mentioned in reference to Pettibon's early career, but without any substantive analysis of that connection, a fact about which

the artist himself has complained.<sup>3</sup> Kelley's musical endeavors have recently drawn interest, due to the release of both old and new recordings over the past decade, accompanied by sporadic reunion tours of his various bands from the 1970s and 80s. Yet, this music is almost always discussed independently of his visual art, with only cursory consideration of the historical and stylistic relationship between the two.<sup>4</sup> The same can be said about McCarthy, whose music and musical affiliations have, of the three, received by far the least amount of scrutiny.<sup>5</sup>

However, such links are not only relevant, but crucial—to both the music these artists have produced and to their art in general—and a number of their visual works can only be fully understood in light of those connections. Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon do not distinguish between their auditory output and its visual counterpart, both of which embody a profound disenchantment. The defining characteristics of their art—its irreverence and comic virulence, its conflation of high and low, its embrace of perversion and contradiction—can thus be found in their music, much of which preceded their mature visual work. The bands that influenced this music were therefore important to the development of these artists' oeuvres on the whole. They set the stage, so to speak, for

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Pettibon's interview with Ulrich Loock in *Raymond Pettibon*, ed. Ulrich Loock (Bern: Kunsthalle Bern, 1995), 94. The sentiment is then reiterated in the artist's interview with Dennis Cooper in *Raymond Pettibon*, by Robert Storr et al (London: Phaidon Press Ltd, 2001), 13-15.

<sup>4</sup> Two brief articles that do address these issues are David Marsh's "Mike Kelley and Detroit" (*Catholic Tastes*, 39-42) and Kim Gordon's "Is it My Body?" (*Catholic Tastes*, 175-82), both of which will be covered later in this chapter.

<sup>5</sup> I have found virtually no articles, essays or books that deal with McCarthy's musical endeavors in anything but a cursory way. It is rarely acknowledged in the scholarship on the artist, and only in passing if it is. See, for example, Rugoff's "Mr. McCarthy's Neighborhood," 37.

Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon's own artistic strategies. As discussed, these strategies crystallized between the mid-1970s and early 1980s, a period that also coincided with the peak of each artist's participation in his respective music scene.

Prior to this period, McCarthy's work had consisted mainly of perceptual games and irrational physical tasks. *Inverted Hallway* (fig. 18) and *Inverted Room* (both 1970), for example, are collections of photographs of institutional architectural spaces turned upside-down or sideways in order to disorient the viewer.<sup>6</sup> Other early works were comprised of actions designed to explore the boundaries between the body and its environment.<sup>7</sup> These included simple tasks, like *Hold and Apple in Your Armpit* (1970), and more complex ones, like *Plaster Your Head and One Arm into a Wall* (1972) (fig. 19)—both of which consisted of the literal fulfillment of their title's instructions. This approach is also the basis of a series of performances from the early seventies—such as *Face Painting – Floor, White Line* (1972) and *Face, Head, Shoulder Painting – Wall Black Line* (1972)—in which McCarthy used his body as a paintbrush. All of this grew out of his student work at the University of Utah in the late 1960s. In *Too Steep, Too Fast* (1968), for example, McCarthy ran down a hill until he lost physical control; in *Mountain Bowling* (1969), he tossed a bowling ball down a slope, transforming it into a dangerous projectile.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Dan Cameron, "The Mirror Stage," in *Paul McCarthy* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 2000), 58.

<sup>7</sup> Cameron, 59.

<sup>8</sup> Rugoff, "Mr. McCarthy's Neighborhood," 37.

While many of the basic elements of his later practices were present in these early performances, photographs and videos—namely, an engagement with the body, an attempt to challenge social norms, and a penchant for irreverence and absurdity—in the mid-1970s, McCarthy’s work turned noticeably darker, more confrontational and discomforting.<sup>9</sup> He also began a direct engagement with the construction of meaning itself, the ways in which it is loaded upon otherwise neutral materials through routine use and cultural context. As Dan Cameron explains in his catalogue essay, “The Mirror Stage” (2000), beginning in 1974,

McCarthy moved steadily away from the objectified inclusion of his physical self to embrace the spectacle of the body as a repository of society’s most closely guarded mores and taboos. As part of this process, McCarthy developed a narrow range of stage personalities, each of which served as a kind of distorting mirror in which the individual’s inability to conform to social mores produces a clash between the free flow of the imagination and actual behavior.<sup>10</sup>

Landmark performances such as *Hot Dog* (1974) (fig. 20) exemplified this transition.

Artist Barbara Smith was part of the small audience that saw this performance. After McCarthy stripped and shaved his body, she recounts,

he stuffs his penis into a hotdog 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 hotdogs...Binding his head with gauze and adding more hotdogs, 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 anyone of us vomit, we might trigger him to do likewise.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> For an overview of McCarthy’s development, see “Paul McCarthy: the Evolution of a Performance Artist,” by Linda Burnham, *High Performance* 8, no. 1 (1985): 37-41.

<sup>10</sup> Cameron, 60.

<sup>11</sup> Barbara Smith, quoted in Rugoff, “Mr. McCarthy’s Neighborhood,” 43.

Such performances dealt with a wide range of issues—psychological, biological and social—to be addressed in subsequent chapters. In general, however, their basic objective was to not only break with rules of civilized behavior, but force them into conflict and thus and expose their conditionality. To produce these effects, McCarthy employed repulsion, perversity, contradiction and dumb humor, twisting languages and forms in order to contaminate a range of cultural norms and ideals. As Smith detected, he also sought to implicate the viewer as an accessory to his social offenses.

The mid-1970s was a formative time for Kelley as well. His earliest visual works date from this period, during which he was a student at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Described by the artist as “willful perversions of my training”<sup>12</sup> and “totally unacceptable in any *art* kind of way,”<sup>13</sup> these drawings and paintings are awkward amalgamations of preexistent styles and forms. They consist of cubist-like designs, popular culture references, commodity detritus, abstract shapes, expressionistic gestures, portraiture and text, jumbled together in deliberately disjointed and confounding ways. *Painting with Hawaiian Mask, Ballerina, and De Stijl Painting* (1976) (fig. 21), for example, is a flat-footed *mélange* of modernist languages—recalling artists as diverse as Degas, Picasso, Mondrian and de Kooning—that refuses to gel into a coherent whole. Whereas Kelley’s technique belongs to a lineage of appropriation and collage, it was also meant to operate against its numerous precedents. In a catalogue essay for an exhibition of work from this period, “Missing Time: Works on Paper 1974-1976, Reconsidered”

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<sup>12</sup> Mike Kelley, from exhibition catalogue for “The Thirteen Seasons [Heavy on the Winter]” (1995), reprinted in *Mike Kelley 1985-1996*, by José Lebrero Stals et al (Barcelona: Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 1997), 101.

<sup>13</sup> Kelley, Miller interview, 7.

(1995), Kelley argues that, while artists such as Robert Rauschenberg similarly fused a diverse array of styles, attention to cultural meaning remained secondary to more formalist concerns. Though this assertion is certainly debatable, it is significant that Kelley distinguishes his style for its “associative tensions between...loaded images, images that couldn’t be reduced so easily to a kind of abstract equivalency.”<sup>14</sup> Like McCarthy, he attempted to force divergent cultural motifs into collision, producing an “ideological clash” that he hoped would unhinge their social connotations.<sup>15</sup> The goal, according to Kelley, was to “employ conflicting techniques of paint handling to push...the limits of equivalency.”<sup>16</sup> The disruptive effects of these hybrid paintings are further enhanced by their sheer technical ineptitude. Severely dumbed down, the individual components of such works exhibit a calculated clumsiness absent from previous collage aesthetics. Though he soon abandoned the medium, this blend of incongruity and inelegance has remained a defining feature of Kelley’s oeuvre.

Pettibon’s mature style emerged a few years later. His earliest images are political cartoons produced for the UCLA paper, *The Daily Bruin*, to which he contributed while a student at the university.<sup>17</sup> In an untitled drawing from 1975, for

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<sup>14</sup> Mike Kelley, “Missing Time: Works on Paper 1974-1976, Reconsidered” (1995), reprinted in *Minor Histories*, 64-65.

<sup>15</sup> As Kelley later recalled, “I was always wondering whether these collisions of style had any particular meaning, whether there was an ideological clash being represented, or whether that fact that it was paint just neutralized the conflict” (Mike Kelley, quoted in “Mike Kelley,” by Jean-Francois Chevrier, *Galleries Magazine*, no. 45 (October-November 1991): 89.

<sup>16</sup> Kelley, “Missing Time,” 65.

<sup>17</sup> Storr, ““You Are What You Read,”” 40.

example, a dopey Gerald Ford is shown galloping on a hobbyhorse (fig. 22). Behind him, Henry Kissinger declares, “IF THAT GUY HAD AN OUNCE OF BRAIN HE’D BE DANGEROUS,” to which an onlooker responds, “LIKE YOU, HENRY?” Soon, however, Pettibon would make the transition into distinctly darker realms. In an untitled drawing from 1978, for instance, Adolf Hitler receives a “Citizen’s Award of Merit” from the West Berlin, New Jersey Chamber of Commerce (fig. 23). The distasteful and intentionally heavy-handed humor of such works foreshadowed his subsequent oeuvre, yet they were still structured as traditional political cartoons. His earliest artist book, *Captive Chains* (1978), likewise offers a single storyline, narrated through a progression of drawings coupled with coherent dialogues or captions.

By his second zine, *Tripping Corpse 1* (1981), Pettibon had joined his penchant for nasty jokes with a formal strategy of open contradiction and confusion. Abandoning linear plot, he began producing collections of full-page frames whose lead-ins and conclusions remain unknown. Here, captions are designed to complicate matters rather than clarify them, while thought and speech bubbles are discarded, further rupturing the traditional flow of narrative. The outcome is a polyphony of voices, in which it is often unclear how many speakers are speaking and how exactly they relate to the corresponding drawing. The pages of *Tripping Corpse 1* (1981) thus present disorienting collisions of text and image, both within individual frames and between those that make up the book as a whole. The result is Pettibon’s trademark style of social commentary. Photocopied, hand-stapled and sold from a dollar or two, these zines also epitomize Pettibon’s embrace of overtly cheap production values. At the end of the 1970s, he

solidified his unique method of artistic critique, achieved through a dissonant medley of crude aesthetics, eclectic references, paradox and black comedy.

Thus, whereas their work is stylistically diverse, the tactics adopted by Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon are quite similar. All three use grotesque contradiction, vulgarity and crass humor, abusing cultural norms in ways that not only trigger viewer expectations, but throw them into crisis. And each arrived independently at this approach during their most concentrated involvement with music. It is therefore no surprise that music has been both a major influence on their work and a prime target of their disparagements. Providing early and innovative models were those unusually caustic, late-sixties and early-seventies bands offering similarly artful blends of uncouthness, insolence and nonsense. While mainstream musicians of the sixties and seventies also sought to dismantle norms, these more marginal groups originated a very different, disenchanting form of musical critique—an acerbic cultural politics that also refuted counterculture rock-and-roll.

Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon have made this style of cultural politics their own. Spanning the entirety of their careers, their music and music-related work also contests a number of later rock movements that perpetuated sixties-era idealism despite its shortcomings. Recognizing that such phenomena are more alike than disparate, they cast doubt upon the very idea of a music-centered subculture—whether utopian or dystopian, whether hippie, heavy metal, punk or otherwise. Exposing these movements as either impotent or counterproductive, their dislocations and dissonancies also implicate a host of non-musical, but similarly impractical, attempts at political and social dissent. Their

treatment of rock-and-roll thus epitomizes their artistic strategies overall—strategies that are themselves rooted in these artists’ earliest music milieus.

### **Rock-n-Rebellion**

More polished though no less perverse than Gobbler, Extended Organ is another band of L.A.-based art-minstrels, including McCarthy, Joe Potts, Fredrik Nilsen and Tom Recchion (and occasionally Kelley).<sup>18</sup> This “creepodelic” quartet takes its name from the titles of two seminal late-sixties albums, *Extended Voices* (1967) and *A Second Wind for Organ* (1968). The former is a compilation, subtitled “New Pieces for Chorus and for Voices Altered Electronically by Sound Synthesizers and Vocoder,” and includes works by legendary composers John Cage, Pauline Oliveros, Toshi Ichiyanagi.<sup>19</sup> The latter is by equally renowned experimental music pioneer David Tudor, who here invents unusual sounds by way of modified baroque organs and amplification. The result, as Richard Teitelbaum puts it in *Second Wind*’s liner notes, are “massive sound clusters and a wide range of timbral variation, set in a surrealist context that at the same time recalls and grotesquely caricaturizes traditional organ music.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Extended Organ was formed in 1997. They later released an album, *XOXO* (Burbank, CA: Birdman Records, 1999).

<sup>19</sup> The full title of the LP is *Extended Voices: New Pieces for Chorus and for Voices Altered Electronically by Sound Synthesizers and Vocoder* (Odyssey Records, 1967). It includes work by Alvin Lucier, John Cage, Robert Ashley, Toshi Ichyanagi and Morton Feldman, all performed by the Brandeis University Chamber Chorus.

<sup>20</sup> Richard Teitelbaum, “Music of Our Time: A Second Wind for Organ,” article originally printed on the back of David Tudor’s LP of the same name (Odyssey Records, 1968). For a synopsis of Tudor’s career, see “The Art of David Tudor,” an introduction to the Getty Research Institute’s archival collections relating to the work of the pianist/composer:

The influences of such works on Extended Organ are clear in the band's freewheeling experimentations with discord, noise and unconventional instrumentation. This approach is then infused with cheeky humor—as evidenced by the double-entendre of the group's name. Potts plays his “chopped optigan”—a modified version of a toy synthesizer produced by the Mattel Company between 1970 and 1973<sup>21</sup>—while Nilson plays a customized guitar, an antique analogue organ and, according to the liner notes of the band's recent release, *XOXO* (1999), a dildo.<sup>22</sup> Recchion accentuates the sound through a wide range of instruments, sampling and digital manipulation. McCarthy is the band's lead “singer,” his meandering and deranged lyrics, yelps, grunts, growls and moans riffing off of the improvisational performances of the others. The resulting compositions combine symphonic orchestration, ambient noise, and gothic, horror-movie spookiness—the latter effect due especially to McCarthy's electronically distorted vocals. Nightmarish and hilarious, corny and seemingly psychotic, these compositions are bizarre amalgams of the profound and the profane.<sup>23</sup>

This coupling of noise and absurdist humor as a critical antithesis to mainstream rock-and-roll has been central to McCarthy's multifarious auditory endeavors, spanning his entire career. During his Utah days, he was interested in experimental music,

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[http://www.getty.edu/research/conducting\\_research/digitized\\_collections/davidtudor/](http://www.getty.edu/research/conducting_research/digitized_collections/davidtudor/).

<sup>21</sup> For a concise history of the Optigan, see:  
<http://www.synthmuseum.com/opt/opt3500201.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Extended Organ, *XOXO* (Burbank, CA: Birdman Records, 1999).

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.cortical.org/pink/2.11.html#Organ>.

specifically that of Cage and Karlheinz Stockhausen.<sup>24</sup> As with his visual work, however, McCarthy's own sonic explorations drifted away from the loftier, avant-garde ambitions of such predecessors. His undignified combination of sound and art, for example, can be observed in an early video, *Pissing, Microphone* (1972). Here, the artist is seen urinating into a metal can equipped with a microphone, the electrical amplification intensifying and distorting the stream's otherwise familiar tinkle.<sup>25</sup>

McCarthy's has performed in bands since the late 1960s, his migration between music and art stemming from the cultural context in which he developed as an artist. In the 1970s, Los Angeles was especially amenable to music-art fusions, and by the end of the decade, the city was home to many such crossbreeds. In "Performance Art in Southern California: An Overview" (1980), Linda Burnham confirms this, noting that "the music and art scenes are closely intertwined in Los Angeles." "Many of the local punk bands, springing up nightly by the dozen, are made up of visual artists," she explains, and "the less formal L.A. artspace will often feature new wave bands between exhibitions."<sup>26</sup> In a recent interview with Kelley, L.A.-based author Dennis Cooper echoes Burnham's observations, explaining that Los Angeles was "a very multidisciplinary art scene," in which there was a lot of collaboration between artists, writers and musicians, all of whom "went to see pretty much the same...experimental

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<sup>24</sup> Rugoff, "Mr. McCarthy's Neighborhood," 37.

<sup>25</sup> Ilrike Groos, Kristin Schmidt and Johannes Lothar Schröder, *Paul McCarthy, Videos 1970-1997* (Hamburg: Kunstverein in Hamburg, 2003), 51.

<sup>26</sup> Linda Burnham, "Performance Art in Southern California: An Overview," *Performance Anthology*, note #6, 436.

music.”<sup>27</sup> According to Cooper, to understand L.A. art of that generation, one would have to look at all of these arts together.<sup>28</sup>

McCarthy was not only a part of that L.A. scene, but also facilitated such interaction. From 1976 to 1979, he co-produced and co-hosted a radio access show called “CLOSE Radio” with artist and experimental musician John Duncan.<sup>29</sup> The weekly program served as an important arena for audio art that dissolved distinctions between art forms. More significantly, however, McCarthy was involved with the Los Angeles Free Music Society, a landmark in the history of experimental music.<sup>30</sup> A collective of fringe anti-rock bands, including Smegma, Le Forte Four, the Doo-Dooettes and Airway, it was formed in 1973 by artist-musicians—and fellow Extended Organ members—Potts, Nilsen and Recchion. Stylistically eclectic, these bands were alike in their embrace of noise, improvisation and absurdity.<sup>31</sup> Their sonic oddities were typically produced through tape-splicing, low-tech electronics and homemade instruments and

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<sup>27</sup> Dennis Cooper, “Mike Kelley Talks with Dennis Cooper,” *Artforum International*, April 2003, 224.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> “Close Radio” aired on KPFK, Los Angeles.

<sup>30</sup> For a history of the LAFMS and related resources, see the Cortical Foundation’s website: [www.cortical.org](http://www.cortical.org). For an anthology of LAFMS music, listen to the 11-CD box set, “Los Angeles Free Music Society: The Lowest Form of Music” (RRRecords, 1994), or selections from it on “Los Angeles Free Music Society: UNBOXED” (Lightbulb Records, 1999).

<sup>31</sup> Byron Coley, “Forever Expanding Internal Horizons” (1994), <http://www.cortical.org/spores/ByronColey.html>.

recorded on cheap equipment.<sup>32</sup> Le Forte Four, for example, offered weird cacophonies that, like Extended Organ, featured Potts and his trademark optigan.

Though their work was diverse, LAFMS musicians demonstrated comparable strategies toward music and culture at large. In his article on the collective, “Unruly and Legion” (2000), Chris Heenan explains that all of these artists “eviscerated musical forms and conventions by recontextualising and abstracting them.” Their method consisted of “utilize[ing] an aspect of known musical and cultural currency as a literal tool for sonic transmogrification.”<sup>33</sup> This included “pre-sampling” appropriations of both extant recordings and musical styles in general. As Heenan points out, the LAFMS was unusual in its conception of music as material in and of itself. “To LAFMS members,” he explains, “recordings are not seen as monoliths to stand back from and worship, but as tools in the world.”<sup>34</sup> Reconfiguring this material, they were able to invent new musical forms and critique preexisting ones simultaneously.

Along with the demented sound collages that resulted, the LAFMS was also directly involved with the Southern California performance art scene—with which it shared many members—often holding Fluxus-style concerts and happenings.<sup>35</sup> A product of that scene, McCarthy is representative of this Southern California music and art miscegenation, having performed with LAFMS musicians since the 1970s. Though

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<sup>32</sup> Dean Suzuki, “LAFMS,” *Wired* Issue 5.04 (April 1997), reprinted at [http://wired.com/wired/archive/5.04/music\\_reviews.html](http://wired.com/wired/archive/5.04/music_reviews.html).

<sup>33</sup> Chris Heenan, “Unruly and Legion,” *X-tra*, vol 4 issue 1, 2000, p 7.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Edwin Pouncey, review of “The Lowest Form of Music,” 10-CD box set, *The WIRE* magazine, reprinted: <http://www.cortical.org/pouncey.html>.

much of this work has been lost to history, his more recent recording with Extended Organ and Gobbler show a strong affiliation with earlier LAFMS strategies—specifically the impudent deconstruction of musical form, likewise based on a music-as-material approach.

The development of this technique in the early and mid-seventies was a direct response to the state of popular music at the time. In a review of the LAFMS compilation “The Lowest Form of Music” (1994), Edwin Pouncey recalls the organization’s original context:

The early 70s were lean years for American music, which was still suffering from the aftershock of Altamont, Manson and the death of the Love Generation. In California the airwaves were spewing forth commercial rock and disco...In the middle of all this rose the awe-inspiring spectre of The Los Angeles Free Music Society, a happy band of musical oddballs who...were eager to let their own creative demons loose on the world.<sup>36</sup>

Indeed, the bands that made up the LAFMS were a hostile collective, attacking both sixties popular music and its immediate backlash. As David Pichaske notes in *A Generation in Motion: Popular Music and Culture in the Sixties* (1979), “it was fashionable by 1972 to claim that rock, like the movement and the sixties, was dead.”<sup>37</sup> While such a conclusion was not only premature, but based on a restrictive definition of the what rock actually was and is, the pessimism he identifies was real. Though the music lived on and continued to evolve, what Pouncey and Pichaske both recognize is an end to a particular rock-and-roll paradigm, a conception of popular music as an agent of

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> David Pichaske, *A Generation in Motion: Popular Music and Culture in the sixties* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1979), 217.

political action, integral to the larger youth movement. By the end of the sixties, this notion—like the counterculture overall—was increasingly seen as naïve or misguided, if not actually counterproductive.

As Pouncey suggests, such a realization was the product of the general disillusionment of the time, exacerbated by the widespread commercialization of rock-and-roll. The near-religious devotion to rock in the sixties had blinded fans to the fact that, no matter how defiant it sounded, popular music was subject to corporate forces forever poised to exploit it at every opportunity. In fact, as has been widely pointed out, rock was actually born out of the processes of cooptation and exploitation—namely, of the African-American writers and musicians who largely originated its sound. In the sixties, the industry had become both less transparent and more sophisticated, capable of immediately absorbing new trends while preserving rock’s aura of unruliness. In fact, that aura was fundamental to the industry’s marketing strategy. As Pichaske notes, the most effective tactic was to

flood the market with cheap, harmless, and *manageable* imitations; soon enough the original can be neither heard nor recognized. The only trick, and it is one that is easily mastered, is that the style must maintain the appearance of revolt as long as possible.<sup>38</sup>

By the late-sixties, such tactics had produced a proliferation of kitsch-rock—that is, rock-and-roll purged of political content.<sup>39</sup> By the early 1970s, the lines between music as political activism and music as commercial venture were as blurry as ever.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 155-7.

<sup>39</sup> Its most extreme version was The Monkees, a highly diluted, pseudo-Beatles “band” manufactured for a television sitcom. Though its members did not actually play on their albums, their first two releases—*The Monkees* (1966) and *More of The Monkees* (1967)—skyrocketed to the top of the charts. For a complete history of the Monkees, see

The recognition of this fact had profound implications, since popular music had previously been cast as a viable instrument of political and social change. Rock had provided the soundtrack to a disgruntled sixties generation faced with increasing instability and strife. In the first half of the decade, this voice was most prominently articulated by a group of folk-oriented singer-songwriters—artists including Bob Dylan, Pete Seeger, Malvina Reynolds, Phil Ochs, Tom Paxton, and Joan Baez—who sang of freedom, justice, peace and love, and nonviolent resistance. However, by the mid-sixties, the social message of folk was fused with a more aggressive rock style, heralded by the Beatles' *Rubber Soul* (1965) and folk apostate Dylan's newly electrified sound on *Bringing it All Back Home* (1965). As Pichaske notes, "the Beatles and the Stones and Dylan and an explosion of their followers gave protest a much broader audience than it had ever had before, and a range of techniques infinitely more sophisticated and more suited to the times than Seeger had ever dreamt possible."<sup>40</sup>

Indeed, rock was unrivaled in its ability to express the anxieties, anger and confusion of the moment. Accessible, abundant, and possessing an astonishing power to mobilize large masses of young people, it was considered capable of stimulating sweeping transformations of consciousness and establishing a broad community of belief. As John Street points out in *Rebel Rock: The Politics of Popular Music* (1986), the fact that the counterculture in general was highly decentralized and disordered allowed rock

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<http://www.monkees.net/docs/history.htm>.

<sup>40</sup> Pichaske, 64.

to assume a unifying role.<sup>41</sup> More than any other medium, it became the common dialect of personal and public protest. Beyond the cultural politics of its rebellious image, rock music thus came to embody a more focused agenda. (In fact, it often served as a staging ground for the contemporaneous politicization of sex, discussed in the next chapter. Doors lead singer Jim Morrison, for example, called himself an “erotic politician,” and claimed that “we make concerts sexual politics.”<sup>42</sup>) Boasting a self-proclaimed disestablishmentarianism, rock was distinguished as a formidable anti-institutional force, a political movement in and of itself.

As with the counterculture overall, however, the rock-and-roll rebellion was short-lived. Though the best of sixties rock can legitimately be credited with rallying young people and broadening social and political consciousness, the “radical” principles promoted by the music were actually rather tame, if not outright traditional. Sixties protest music was less a call for revolution than ardent re-affirmation of American values—of justice, democracy, equality and fairness—which the previous generation had apparently betrayed.<sup>43</sup> Responding to a perceived gap between American myth and reality, the most prominent rock voices sought to revitalize these basic values, rather than to completely transform or replace them. Though the counterculture did have its extremist factions, the messages conveyed by the popular music of the time typically

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<sup>41</sup> John Street, *Rebel Rock: The Politics of Popular Music* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1986), 74.

<sup>42</sup> Jim Morrison, quoted in *Make Love Not War: The Sexual Revolution, An Unfettered History*, by David Allyn (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 2000), 130-1.

<sup>43</sup> Pichaske, 51-2.

conformed to more mainstream themes of social equality, anti-war protest and rather nebulous notions of “freedom.”

By the early seventies, social critics began to recognize that popular music was actually founded upon a mix of conservatism and commercialism, effectively masked by rock’s self-proclaimed associations with radical politics. In his collection of writings from the late sixties, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1978), Daniel Bell observed that what was commonly considered rebellious at the time was often more submissive than it appeared. More superficially irreverent than truly revolutionary, most so-called radical activity was, according to Bell, simply a search for emotional release masquerading as political endeavor, a search “legitimated in a liberal culture and exploited (as in the music industry) by commercial entrepreneurs who affect a ‘mod’ life-style of their own.”<sup>44</sup> In *Revolution as Theatre: Notes on the New Radical Style* (1971), Robert Brustein offered a similar conclusion. Noting the increase in “radical” expression in mainstream media, Brustein assured that “the Administration... need not worry, for little has come out of the these appearances except entertainment.” “From the photos of the innumerable groups that glower hairily from record covers,” he furthered, “you would never guess how fabulously profitable the rock business has become or how vast is its potential for exploiting simulated poverty and rural affectations.” “The result,” he

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<sup>44</sup> Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), 145.

claimed, “is not revolution but rather theatre—a product of histrionic personalities and staged events.”<sup>45</sup>

The most prominent of these staged events were the music festivals of the late sixties. Most famously, the 1969 Woodstock Music and Arts Fair—with its enormous crowds, all-star lineup of musicians, and celebrated aura of permissiveness—was immediately mythologized as a historic occasion marking a profound cultural and political shift.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, Woodstock provided a sense of belonging and a communal voice and identity for young people, affirming the power of rock music as a unifying force.<sup>47</sup> Arguably, however, the rock festival that most succinctly epitomized the internal

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<sup>45</sup> Robert Brustein, *Revolution as Theatre: Notes on the New Radical Style* (New York: Liverlight, 1971), 17-26.

<sup>46</sup> Billed as an “Aquarian Exposition,” the Woodstock Music and Arts Fair was organized by John Roberts, Joel Rosenman, Artie Kornfeld and Michael Lang. It took place on August 15-17, 1969 in Bethel, NY, on Max Yasgur's farm, about fifty miles outside of Woodstock, NY. More than thirty groups and musicians performed. Attendance numbers vary widely, but usually fall anywhere between half a million and a million—much greater than the 186,000 tickets sold. As John Street notes, Woodstock was considered not only a music festival and communal gathering, but a political assembly (Street, 74).

<sup>47</sup> Nonetheless, Woodstock’s organizers were fully complicit in the commercialization of the scene. As Adam Stanley comments in “Remember A Day: An Analysis Of Over Twenty Years Of American Rock Music Festivals,” “An aspect of Woodstock of which few people are aware is despite how it may have looked, it was a very calculated, organized, and commercial venture. The four principal promoters were incorporated in the state of New York as Woodstock Ventures, Inc. As an organization, they were powerful enough to supervise the filming of the festival, and arrange for its production and release, with all profits going to them; this was not a charity event” (Adam Stanley, “Remember A Day: An Analysis Of Over Twenty Years Of American Rock Music Festivals,” <http://www.echoes.com/rememberaday/index.html>). Street confirms this point, noting that Woodstock was founded on “cynical calculation, media attention and the self-aggrandizement of the participants,” as “the organizers seemed deliberately to exploit the romantic idealism that the music suggested” (Street, 74). Regarding ticket prices, for example, one of the festival’s planners openly explained that “you’ve got to set a fair price, one that’s going to turn a profit at the gate and yet won’t offend the hippies”

contradictions of the counterculture movement was held not in upstate New York, but at the Altamont Speedway outside of San Francisco later that year.<sup>48</sup> Conceived as a West Coast version of Woodstock, it instead became the scene of mass violence and near-chaos.<sup>49</sup> The festival ultimately came to stand as an embodiment not of peace and love, but, as music historian Jim Curtis put it, of “diabolical egotism, hype, ineptitude, money manipulation, and, at base, a fundamental lack of concern for humanity.”<sup>50</sup>

Today, Altamont is synonymous with failed sixties idealism. Exposing gaps between theory and reality, poetry and practice, Altamont emerged as the prime example of what might happen if the most rebellious sixties sentiments were taken too literally.<sup>51</sup> As Ralph J. Gleason explained in his article, “Aquarius Wept” (1970), “if the name

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(quoted in Street, 74). As Street points out, the fact that it ultimately became a free festival was result not of pure, non-capitalistic idealism, but of simple logistics—the ticket booths were not built in time.

<sup>48</sup> Altamont was a free concert held on December 6, 1969. It was headlined and sponsored by the Rolling Stones, and also featured Santana, the Grateful Dead, Jefferson Airplane, Crosby Stills Nash and Young, and the Flying Burrito Brothers.

<sup>49</sup> Most notoriously, the Hell’s Angels were placed in charge of security, a decision that may have initially seemed appropriately anti-institutional, but which resulted in near chaos. The Angels beat up numerous fans and allegedly stabbed an African-American man, Meredith Hunter, to death in front of the stage. Following Altamont, commentators recognized what the debacle meant for the movement overall. A week after the festival, for example, *The Berkeley Barb* pithily recapped it: “Someone was knifed to death. Lots of people were beaten. Love and peace were fucked by the Hell’s Angels in front of hundreds of thousands of people who did nothing” (“A Murderous Thing” *Berkeley Barb* [Dec. 12-18, 1969], quoted in *The Hippies and American Values*, by Timothy Miller [Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1991], 83).

<sup>50</sup> Jim Curtis, *Rock Eras: Interpretations of Music and Society 1954-1984* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1987), 227.

<sup>51</sup> Robert G. Pielke, *You Say You Want A Revolution* (Chicago, Illinois: Nelson-Hall, 1986), 135.

‘Woodstock’ has come to denote the flowering of one phase of the youth culture, ‘Altamont’ has come to mean the end of it.”<sup>52</sup> The latter festival irrevocably exposed the futility of politicized rock as a cornerstone of the counterculture movement—one which, according to this account, had in total lasted less than four months.

Emerging in the wake of this letdown, the work of the LAFMS and its progeny developed a more self-conscious approach to form. Combined with their refusal to see anything as sacrosanct, the notion of music-as-material allowed these bands to circumvent the pitfalls of more idealistic ventures, reflecting the sense of post-sixties disillusionment. With regards to McCarthy, this tactic not only relates to his own musical ventures, but is central to his broader artistic strategy. As mentioned, it was during the early and mid-1970s—when he was most directly involved with the LAFMS music scene—that he arrived at his mature artistic style. He too initiated a more direct confrontation with culture at this time, similarly employing it as material for art. In “Mr. McCarthy’s Neighborhood” (1996), Ralph Rugoff recognizes the significance of this pivotal moment in the development of the artist’s strategy. It was then, he explains, that McCarthy began to produce works that “not only assailed taboos but shuffled cultural reference points with disconcerting disregard for the categories and distinctions that underlie our everyday notions of order.”<sup>53</sup>

Along with the aforementioned *Hot Dog* (1974), performances such as *Meat Cake* (1974) (fig. 24) and *Tubbing* (1975) (fig. 25) epitomized this new approach. These works all address the cultural construction of meaning, exposing its inherent conditionality and

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<sup>52</sup> Ralph J. Gleason, "Aquarius Wept," *Esquire*, August 1970, 84.

<sup>53</sup> Rugoff, “Mr. McCarthy’s Neighborhood,” 33.

precariousness by forcing multiple and often contradictory connotations upon single objects or actions. In the latter two, McCarthy dressed in a blatantly incomplete style of drag. Donning wigs, makeup and lingerie, but doing nothing to hide his hairy and pimply, overtly masculine body, the artist dislodges socially determined signs of gender. And, similar to his later *My Doctor* performance, McCarthy produced symbolic slippages via his disconcerting use of materials, especially popular American groceries. In *Tubbing*, sausage is simultaneously shit, cock and food; ketchup oscillates between condiment and blood; moisturizer is transformed from sexual lubricant to cum to diaper cream and back again. As will be discussed more thoroughly in subsequent chapters, such performances lay waste to a range of oppositions—clean and dirty, male and female, wholesome and perverse, appealing and repulsive—upon which the most basic cultural values are organized. Producing what Rugoff calls a “semantic disarray,” they destabilize those values, forcing an acknowledgement of their dependence on context.

McCarthy’s seminal mid-seventies substance abuses were, in this sense, analogous to LAFMS musical maltreatments from this same period. Both were calculated to explode norms, categories and standards, offering perversions designed to operate on the level of content and form. (McCarthy disrupts the latter with his free mix of traditional art materials like paint and wood with nontraditional substances—the aforementioned food products, along with motor oil, Vaseline, cold cream, dog food, stuffed animals and dolls, prefab costumes and masks.<sup>54</sup>) At this time, McCarthy began

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 32-33.

to embrace a conspicuous amateurism,<sup>55</sup> similar to that of the LAFMS bands he knew and collaborated with at the time. Though planned out in advance, his performances from this period replaced elaborate spectacle with actions that seemed unscripted, random and idiotic. Likewise, his video, *Sailor's Meat* (1975) (fig. 26), exhibits cheap, B-movie production values. Both McCarthy and the LAFMS celebrated technical incompetence, effectively rupturing the sincerity of their work without completely obliterating it; their work is funny and disconcerting at the same time. These artists were thus able to circumvent artistic pretensions and self-seriousness without diminishing their ability to critique. In fact, this approach enhanced that ability. Like McCarthy's performances and videos from this period, LAFMS music functions as a "distorting mirror" held up to culture—the result of its music-as-material approach, coupled with a fierce anti-idealism.

The development of this LAFMS strategy was, however, not only a response to the failures of sixties political rock; it also operated against subsequent musical trends. Early-to-mid-seventies popular music, for example, appeared to recoil inward—both stylistically and emotionally. Bands such as Emerson, Lake, and Palmer, Yes, King Crimson, The Moody Blues, and Deep Purple developed a baroque, "art rock" style. Meanwhile, songwriters such as Leonard Cohen, Jackson Browne, James Taylor, and Dan Fogelberg churned out an abundance of acoustic-based confessionals.<sup>56</sup> The former trend marked a retreat into intricate composition and musical virtuosity, the latter into autobiography. Both abandoned the objective of mobilizing listeners on behalf of cultural change, and both were for the most part politically neutral. Like the work of the

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>56</sup> Pichaske, 216.

LAFMS, such departures were essentially responses to the disenchantment with rock-and-roll rebelliousness. Yet, whereas the LAFMS developed a new approach to musical critique, these trends represented a shift toward rock escapism.<sup>57</sup> Though a retreat from the prior belief in rock as an agent of political change, this shift advanced a similarly romanticized notion of art as able to somehow transcend its own social situation.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> This movement was rooted in the late sixties and epitomized by the Beatles' 1969 release, *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. As Pichaske notes,

it's hard to respond to the kind of criticisms leveled by the Beatles in *Sgt. Pepper*. Clearly, liberal reform, escalated protest, and tinkering one way or another with the system were out. Attractive options were all escapist: withdraw into the self or loop through time-space to some future world, past world, or remote corner of the present (Pichaske, 82).

The album thus signaled a rock-retreat from social issues and a turn toward psychedelic diversion, a development that paralleled the increasing popularity of hallucinogens at the time. It must be mentioned here that initially drug use was also seen as a profoundly political experience, an idea popularized by Dr. Timothy Leary (see, for example, Leary's "The Molecular Revolution" in *The Politics of Ecstasy* [New York: Putnam, 1968], 332-61). Theodore Roszak provides a good history and analysis of psychedelic culture in *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1969), 155-77.

<sup>58</sup> The musical quest for distraction also emerged in less heady form around 1968, namely in rock's growing affection for simple country life and embrace of a country-inspired sound—always one of its many components but now shifted to the forefront. This not only marked a withdrawal from active political resistance, but the promotion of a series of hopelessly traditional themes, such as a return to rural roots and the land, cast as the embodiments of basic truths, honesty and authentic existence. Dylan's *John Wesley Harding* (1968), *Nashville Skyline* (1969) and *New Morning* (1970) all exemplify this new country-infused sound (Pichaske, 139), as do Joan Baez's *David's Album* (1969) and *One Day at a Time* (1970), and Steven Stills's *Manassas* (1972), which offers songs such as "Colorado" (1972):

I am a man I live alone  
 Don't much bother me  
 It won't be long  
 Come a woman who wants to be near  
 Me and my mountains, we'll be right here.

In defiance of these popular trends, the work of the LAFMS embodied a more self-conscious approach to form. This was related to the concurrent and more spectacular rise of Glam rock, another indicator of how far popular music had diverged from the activism of only a few years earlier. In place of the supposed authenticity and sincerity of their rock predecessors, artists such as David Bowie and bands such as Roxy Music offered elaborate theatricality and an open embrace of superficiality.<sup>59</sup> The result was a sort of “postmodern” rock, in which image and costume were made central, personas freely appropriated and exchanged. More ultra-culture than counterculture, these performers—especially Bowie, who notoriously slipped from one fictitious identity to another—played off of the presumptions and pretensions of the previous era.<sup>60</sup> However, whereas Glam underscored the notion that popular music is more about fashion than polemics, it was never clear where it stood in relation to contemporary culture—whether

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Similarly, musicians evoked past eras as examples of simpler, more innocent times. The medieval emerged as a prominent subject in late-sixties and early-seventies music (e.g., Joan Baez’s “Sweet Sir Galahad” (1968), David Crosby’s “Guinnevere” (1969), Neil Young’s “After the Gold Rush” (1970), the Kinks’ “Arthur” (1971) and Leonard Cohen’s “Joan of Arc” (1971) [Pichaske, 100-02]). Populated by knights, archers, fair maidens and princes, songs from this period offer images of the medieval that are not only highly idealized, but thoroughly conventional. They represent a rather straightforward repetition of a standard artistic theme that can be traced back to late eighteenth and early nineteenth century romanticism (for an overview of romantic medievalism, see “The Beginnings of Romanticism in the German-speaking World,” by Petra ten-Doesschate Chu, *Nineteenth-Century European Art* [New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2003], 157-73). This exaltation of the medieval as a mythic utopia—one of monkish piety, mystical spirituality and chivalrous pageantry—was appealing to a frustrated sixties generation longing for an escape.

<sup>59</sup> For a history of Glam, see *20<sup>th</sup> Century Rock and Roll: Glam Rock*, by Dave Thompson (Burlington, Ontario: Collector's Guide Publishing, 2000).

<sup>60</sup> For a comprehensive overview of Bowie’s work, see *The Complete David Bowie*, by Nicholas Pegg (Richmond, England: Reynolds & Hearn Ltd, 2002).

it was complicit or critical.<sup>61</sup> Whereas its ambiguity certainly distinguished it from the frank political messages of sixties rock, as Street points out,

both eras were occupied with the transforming effect of ideas and images. Glitter replaced the rhetoric, sequins replaced beads, and decadence replaced politics. But underneath, much remained the same...Both eras celebrated the individual and each person's ability to change their world; and both sought to do so by escaping from the established world through music.<sup>62</sup>

The LAFMS bands, by contrast, were so abusive of musical conventions and so dissonant that their position vis-à-vis mainstream culture was never really in doubt. They were, however, not the only bands to arrive at this approach. Their music-as-material tactics had their equivalents in a number of alternative musical endeavors of the early and mid-1970s. Kelley's band, Destroy All Monsters, was one such venture, similarly opposing both the politicization of rock in the sixties and the reactionary de-politicization of it in early seventies. Like McCarthy, Kelley's musical activities evince an acute awareness of the issues facing popular music at the time—the growing recognition of rock's commercialism, the retreat into musical escapism, and a widening sense of disillusionment.

Named after a 1968 Japanese B-movie, Destroy All Monsters was formed in 1974 by Kelley and fellow Ann Arbor-based art students Cary Loren, Jim Shaw and Niagara. Fusing tape loops, feedback and sampling with knowingly inept, improvisational instrumentation produced on the cheapest equipment they could find, DAM pursued even

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<sup>61</sup> Indeed, Kelley has expressed “serious misgivings” about the latter interpretation, which claims that “the constantly changing, chameleon persona *represents* empowerment” (Kelley, “Cross-Gender/Cross-Genre,” 111).

<sup>62</sup> Street, 172

more extreme sound experiments than their predecessors. Basically, their music was made from anything that could produce noise—used speakers, vacuum cleaners, hairdryers, toy organs run through guitar amps, squeeze dolls, rattles, old and damaged reel-to-reel recordings—collected from garage sales and garbage bins. The band had no gigs. Instead, they crashed parties. At a local comic book convention, they borrowed the hired Trekkie band’s PA system, and played two lines from Black Sabbath’s “Iron Man” (1971) over and over again until they were thrown out.<sup>63</sup>

Much of DAM’s recordings—done on tapes that were either second-hand or purchased at Kmart<sup>64</sup>—feature the hauntingly hypnotic, doom-laden voice of Niagara and her absurdist ruminations, whose references range from vampires and aliens to drugs, violence, and other macabre subjects. These include dystopian songs like “Evil Works” and the apocalyptic “That’s My Ideal” (track 5), which sardonically declares

Every man is  
Dead and gone  
In the ground  
That’s my ideal  
That’s my ideal

Others are laced with comedy, both adolescent, as in “Puke Like a Motherfucker” (track 6)—a recording of someone doing just that—and black, as in the necrophiliac “I Love You, But You’re Dead” (track 7):

Am I in heaven or am I in hell  
I see your body, and I don’t feel so well

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<sup>63</sup> Mike Kelley, “Some Aesthetic High Points” (1991), reprinted in *Minor Histories*, 44. “Iron Man” is Black Sabbath’s most famous song. It is off their second LP, *Paranoid* (Warner Brothers, 1971).

<sup>64</sup> Liner Notes to Destroy All Monsters box set, reprinted in *Destroy All Monsters: Geisha This*, by Mike Kelley, et al (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 1997), n.p.

Cuz it's dead  
 I love it  
 And it's dead  
 You can tell  
 Cuz' its bled  
 In the bed

Such lyrics are backed by spaced-out psychedelic reverberations, atonal harmonies and screeching, pseudo-expressionistic feedback—all produced by DAM's deliberately dysfunctional musical devices. Yet, despite the dissonance—or, better yet, because of it—the resulting sound is both intriguing and powerfully symphonic, belying the low-budget instrumentation.

Though Destroy All Monsters responded to the general state of popular music at the time, their approach also stemmed from a particular Detroit-based movement of the late sixties and early seventies—a kind of counter-counterculture comprised of anti-rock bands such as Iggy Pop and the Stooges. In a biographical essay titled “Some Aesthetic High Points” (1991), Kelley recounts a Stooges concert he attended at a biker bar in Wayne, Michigan, in 1974. He was amazed by Iggy's persona—his discordant mix of sloppy transvestitism, contorted gesture and moronic antics—and his largely antagonistic relationship to his audience. After stopping the show to have a fan thrown out, Kelley recalls, the band launched into a rendition of the fifties rock classic “Louie, Louie.” As he explains,

it is hard to explain now what “Louie, Louie” meant at that time, when rock music was trying to be important. It was the first song a hillbilly rocker would learn on his guitar to impress the girls at a school dance—a throwback to an embarrassing time when rock music was entertainment for fraternity boys, not an instrument of social change. It was a slap in the face to the audience.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Kelley, “Some Aesthetic High Points,” 43.

They went on to play the song three times in a row, taunting the crowd at each interval. Moments later, the show ended in a riot. For Kelley, it was not just the Stooges' assault on self-important, "progressive" music that impressed him, but also the way in which they carried it out. Rather than taking a position or making a direct argument, the band presented a form of social criticism through the cheeky manipulation of cultural modes and expectations. As Kelley recalls, this technique was supremely effective:

He played the audience like a fish. The crowd was in the palm of his hand. They would suffer insult after insult, have their faces rubbed over and over again in their own complicity, and come running back for more...It was the best piece of theater I have ever seen.<sup>66</sup>

Kelley claims to have learned everything he knows about performance from the Stooges (indeed, DAM's "Iron Man" performance could be seen as an homage to that band's "Louie, Louie" routine) and from Sun Ra, a musical iconoclast of a very different sort. Though they may seem to embody opposite extremes—one a noise-rock provocateur, the other a transcendental jazz musician—both artists provoked disruption through spectacle, employing what Kelley refers to as "Brechtian theater techniques."<sup>67</sup> Whereas Iggy razed rock constructs, Sun Ra melded disparate styles and forms, including African tribal music, big band jazz, science fiction allusions, Egyptian poetry and electronic noise.<sup>68</sup> Describing a concert he attended in the early seventies, Kelley recalls

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 43-44.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 42-44.

<sup>68</sup> Sun Ra (1914-1993) was a pianist, jazz improviser and leader of his big-band "Arkestra." He developed a myth-based philosophy of black liberation, combining references to Egypt as the ancestral homeland of black culture with interplanetary space travel. See John F. Szwed, *Space is the Place: The Life and Times of Sun Ra* (New York:

that Sun Ra’s continual shifting of musical gears resulted in “the most intellectually and physically demanding show I have ever seen.”<sup>69</sup> Sun Ra and the Stooges thus converged in their similar disregard for music categories—the latter toward rupture, the former toward synthesis. As David Marsh explains in his brief essay, “Mike Kelley and Detroit,”

if Sun Ra’s work led naturally to a desire to fuse forms at the most cosmic level...the Stooges led [Kelley] with equal inevitability to his fascination with cultural discards and the psychology of dirt. Any but the most desiccated attempt to merge popular culture with high art involves some encounter with these issues.<sup>70</sup>

Essentially, both groups exhibited an anthropological approach to music—mining styles and conventions and mixing them in ways that draw attention to their construction. “Sun Ra and the Stooges,” Marsh observes, “shared a feeling that amounted to a struggle between mind, eye, and ear about where the proper center of attention ought to lie.”<sup>71</sup> Such an effect would become a central component of Kelley’s own musical (and artistic) strategy, similarly founded on perceptual and conceptual disparity. Destroy All Monsters effectively combined the farcical idiocy of the Stooges with the big-band orchestrations of Sun Ra, fusing them into hybrids that defy pop-music categories.

Frank Zappa and his band, the Mothers of Invention, were also a key DAM influence—progenitors of what Kelley calls the “abject aesthetic.” The Mothers were important, he remarks, for their

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Pantheon, 1997).

<sup>69</sup> Kelley, “Some Aesthetic High Points,” 42.

<sup>70</sup> Marsh, 42.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid..

use of pastiche structures, combining elements of pop, rock, free jazz, new music, electronic music, and comedy. The effect is akin to a live reenactment of a tape collage by John Cage. The band was also overtly theatrical, adopting transgressive stage techniques (such as audience baiting and performative discontinuity).<sup>72</sup>

The result were works such “Son of Suzy Creamcheese” (1967), which combines satirical lyrics with disorienting shifts in time signatures.<sup>73</sup> As Pichaske comments,

the dozen records that Zappa and the Mothers packed into the years between 1966 and 1972 are absurdist albums that leave virtually nothing to believe in. Zappa suffered few illusions and made fewer commitments, which was not really very sixties, but it allowed him to throw darts in all directions at once.<sup>74</sup>

For Kelley, this irreverence was superbly refreshing. And he views such works, like those of the Stooges, as profoundly political. In fact, he explains,

the Mothers...were one of the most politically aware musical groups of the period. In a sense, though, they were a realist band ridiculing the romantic utopianism and exoticism of hippie psychedelia. Their satiric ugliness was meant to be a distorted mirroring of the values of dominant culture.<sup>75</sup>

For Zappa, this stemmed from a deep skepticism toward counterculture values in general. “Those kids don’t love each other” he once declared, “they’re in that because it’s like another club—it’s like the modern equivalent of a street gang.” In the end, he concluded,

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<sup>72</sup> Mike Kelley, “Cross-Gender/Cross-Genre,” 106. For an overview of Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention, see *Necessity Is: The Early Years of Frank Zappa & the Mothers of Invention*, by Billy James (London: SAF Publishing Ltd., 2001).

<sup>73</sup> The Mothers of Invention, “Son of Suzy Creamcheese” (Rykodisc, 1967). The song proceeds through four bars of 4/4, followed by four alternations of one bar of 8/8, one bar of 9/8, and concluding with 8/8, 4/8, 5/8, 6/8, and back into 4/4 again (Pichaske, 215).

<sup>74</sup> Pichaske, 207.

<sup>75</sup> Kelley, “Cross-Gender/Cross-Genre,” 106.

“the whole hippies scene is wishful thinking.” “They wish they could love, but they’re full of shit.”<sup>76</sup>

This approach resonated in Detroit, where such ideals seemed particularly dubious. In her essay on Kelley and music, “Is It My Body?” (1993), Kim Gordon—fellow Detroiter, occasional Kelley collaborator and member of the band Sonic Youth—remarks that the Detroit scene “was quite different from the psychedelic sounds of California and the hippie rebellion. This was music coming out of disenchantment with the sixties...the dregs, the end of utopia.”<sup>77</sup> She points to another Motor City influence, Alice Cooper, whose mixed gender signals, stage antics and cheap horror-movie theatrics aligned him with bands like the Mothers of Invention and the Stooges, as well as with Sun Ra. Kelley makes this connection himself, explaining that both Zappa and Cooper combined diverse musical and pop-cultural styles, producing work that evidenced an “anti-hippie reveling in the aesthetics of the ugly.”<sup>78</sup> Gordon reiterates this point, explaining that Cooper “exemplified the blurring and the confusion being expressed in [late-sixties and early-seventies] rock and roll.”<sup>79</sup>

For Destroy All Monsters, such “anti-hippie” groups were welcome antidotes to the more mainstream trends in popular music. In “A Manifesto if Ignorance: Destroy All Monsters” (1996-97), bandmate Cary Loren explains that the group was essentially “an attempt to thumb our noses at the circus of rock-star bullshit and musical emptiness that

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<sup>76</sup> Zappa, quoted in Pichaske, 207.

<sup>77</sup> Gordon, “Is it My Body?,” 177.

<sup>78</sup> Kelley, “Cross-Gender/Cross-Genre,” 108.

<sup>79</sup> Gordon, “Is it My Body?,” 177.

filled the air-waves during the 1970s.”<sup>80</sup> Kelley also makes this point in “To the Throne of Chaos: Where The Thin Flutes Pipe Mindlessly” (1993), the liner notes for a DAM compilation:

To understand Destroy All Monsters one must put themselves [sic] into an early 70s mindset...Musically, this was the era of broken promises. The psychedelic avant-garde vision of a new Pop Music to mimic the new social experiment had proven a pipe dream. There was the sense of living in the decadent twilight occasioned by this fall. And in the mindless flight from this Altamontian negativity a wave of escapist feel-good pap became the dominant musical trend. The music scene was dominated by pseudo-back-to-folk-roots ballads of the James Taylor (or one of his innumerable siblings) variety.

As a result of this “betrayal,” as Kelley calls it, “the most moronic musics of the progressive acid rock period of the late 60s”—Iggy and the Stooges first among them—“all of a sudden seemed its most important products.”<sup>81</sup> DAM was thus an affront to both contemporaneous rock and its more idealistic, then-recent past. Kelley’s “What Destroy All Monsters Means to Me”—published in Loren’s fanzine *Destroy All Monsters Magazine #1* (1976)—encapsulates this sentiment. In a parody of sixties-style utopian programs, Kelley sarcastically describes the band as “a call for a new therapeutic popular music”:

I’m sure, by now, everyone realizes the importance of popularization, of mass-production, of the easing of the lives of many people as possible. Why not mass produce the Destroy All Monsters achievement? Everyone should pump out Monstrous, destructive Destroy All Monsters black noise. If everyone let their aggressions voice themselves in such sound there 1) wouldn’t be any need for

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<sup>80</sup> Cary Loren, “A Manifesto if Ignorance: Destroy All Monsters” (1996-97), *Destroy All Monsters: Geisha This*, by Mike Kelley, et al (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 1997), n.p.

<sup>81</sup> Mike Kelley, “To the Throne of Chaos: Where The Thin Flutes Pipe Mindlessly” (1993), liner notes for *Destroy All Monsters: 1974/1976* (Ecstatic Peace/Father Yod, 1994), reprinted: <http://www.mikekelley.com/DAMthrone.html>.

popular entertainment of any kind, and 2) wouldn't be anything—just an existence of total comfort. I told you so. Let us show you too.<sup>82</sup>

The band's embrace of amateurism and such "black noise" was seen as especially defiant toward a dying breed of progressive, countercultural music. However, DAM was equitably impudent, similarly operating against another, increasingly prominent musical faction: heavy metal. Also emerging in the late-sixties and early-seventies, metal cast itself as a remedy for the counterculture's excess of optimism and idealism. Yet, in actuality, the movement simply inverted sixties-rock codes, substituting despair for hope, dystopia for utopia. Both trends suffered from an excess of self-seriousness and a dearth of humor and self-depreciation. The antics of Destroy All Monsters, by contrast, were deliberately ridiculous and openly comedic. Their intentionally irritating "Iron Man" performance is particularly relevant here, for, as music historian Martin Popoff puts it in *20<sup>th</sup> Century Rock and Roll: Heavy Metal* (2000), "Black Sabbath is the number one most influential metal band of all time...widely credited with inventing the genre."<sup>83</sup>

According to music sociologist Deena Weinstein's *Heavy Metal: The Music and Its Culture* (2000), both the band's music and its name served as "a corrective to the 'peace and love' credo that permeated the youth culture at the time."<sup>84</sup> This quickly became the defining characteristic of the genre. Kelley, however, sees this corrective as not only

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<sup>82</sup> Kelley, "What Destroy All Monsters Means to Me," in *Destroy All Monsters Magazine #1* (1976), reprinted in *Destroy All Monsters: Geisha This*, n.p.

<sup>83</sup> Martin Popoff, *20<sup>th</sup> Century Rock and Roll: Heavy Metal* (Ontario, Canada: Collector's Guide Publishing, 2000), 9.

<sup>84</sup> Deena Weinstein, *Heavy Metal: The Music and Its Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2000), 33.

insufficient, but fundamentally reactionary. “Despite [heavy metal’s] surface difference from Folk and Country rock,” he points out, “it was still a music that was meant to console ‘the people’, not confront them.”<sup>85</sup> The mind-numbing—yet very funny—repetition of the single “Iron Man” lyric caricatured Sabbath’s preeminent metal anthem, while DAM’s numerous doom-and-gloom satires implicitly mocked the pretensions of the movement overall.

Likewise, the band’s shameless ineptitude—as well as that of the LAFMS—defied the technical virtuosity prized by both heavy metal and the more mainstream rock of the time. Their deliberate incompetence was a conscious rebuttal of the godlike guitar-hero, who “like the catholic priest...was a necessary intermediary between you and the ‘truth,’” as Kelley has put it. DAM celebrated the end of such idolatry, along with the notion of rock and roll as a medium of direct communication:

We reveled in the death of rock. We gave up straight rock instrumentation by playing mostly old electronic cast-offs, tape recorders and noise makers, but we felt no qualms about using standard rock instruments either—or playing rock cover versions, albeit very fucked up ones...And, I was not particularly interested in making sense. All the best bands of my youth were ones that were full of contradictions...All of these bands were simultaneously ironic and heartfelt, funny and serious, pop and experimental, lowbrow and highbrow. They were hard to figure out.<sup>86</sup>

DAM’s mix of aesthetics and anti-aesthetics thus aligns the band with LAFMS musicians, who, according to Pouncey, had similarly “grown up on” groups such as The

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<sup>85</sup> Kelley, “To the Throne of Chaos.”

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

Mothers Of Invention and Sun Ra.<sup>87</sup> And the musical strategy employed by all of these groups would become central to Kelley's subsequent art career, just as it would for McCarthy. In fact, at this time, Kelley viewed his art—which mostly consisted of painting—and his music as essentially part of the same endeavor. “In many ways [Destroy All Monsters] was my painting strategy made flesh,” he has noted. Like his band's music, these paintings “combined both the compositional and the ‘natural’ improvisation, with camp and black humor elements in a purposely uncomfortable way.”<sup>88</sup> Along with the aforementioned *Painting with Hawaiian Mask, Ballerina, and De Stijl Painting* (1976), Kelley's *Elegy to the Symbionese Liberation Army* (1975) (fig. 27) and *In Anticipation of America's Bicentennial* (1975) (fig. 28) embody this approach. The former displays the emblem of the Symbionese Liberation Army, the tiny militant organization infamous for their 1974 kidnapping of publishing heiress Patty Hearst, who then chose to join the group in its struggle. The SLA's mix of violent crime, radical rhetoric and quasi-religious beliefs epitomized the blind ignorance of sixties-era idealism and its precipitous demise. Kelley, however, uses its notorious Hydra-insignia in a purposely offhanded way: adorned with a zigzag fringe, it is centered within a geometric composition of floral and faunal patterned wallpaper, pseudo-abstract-expressionist splashes and hand-cut strips of paper. What was at that time an extremely provocative image is thus drained of its cultural significance, presented as just one of many nonobjective forms. More arts-and-crafts project than modernist composition, the work

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<sup>87</sup> Pouncey, <http://www.cortical.org/pouncey.html>.

<sup>88</sup> Mike Kelley, “Missing Time: Works on Paper, 1974-1995, Reconsidered” (1995), reprinted in *Mike Kelley 1985-1996*, 108.

is a clumsy amalgam of contradictory styles and connotations—high and low, revolution and decoration. Similarly, *In Anticipation of America's Bicentennial* unsolicitously combines loaded symbols with a mix of avant-garde and craft aesthetics. Here, collage and abstraction are overlaid with a kitschy centerpiece of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln silhouettes, positioned above two crisscrossed American flags. Both paintings are “purposely uncomfortable,” and both are political in their utter insincerity—in their open deposal of supposedly earnest cultural signs. With their Sun Ra-like eclecticism and Iggy Pop-like indignity, they are analogous to the contemporaneous musical arrangements of Destroy All Monsters. The visual dissonances exhibited in these works test the limits of style, meaning and skill—an effect also triggered by the band’s equally inelegant auditory pastiches.

DAM’s development—and Kelley’s—was, as Marsh points out, intimately tied to the social and cultural situation confronting young Michiganders in early 1970s. Unlike Los Angeles, Detroit was not a primary locus of the sixties counterculture. Indeed, it was home to some of the earliest backlashes against it—a consequence of the fact that the movement’s contradictions were especially acute there. Utopian edifices crumbled quickly in Detroit. Experiencing one of the initial waves of late-sixties disillusionment, it was among the first places where theory collided head-on with reality. Marsh thus notes that the Motor City’s counterculture was indeed very different than that of other cities. As he explains, “the city’s industrial landscape, deteriorating race relations (particularly after the July 1967 urban insurrection that burned major portions of the city to the ground), and the beginning decline of auto-driven prosperity (for production workers, real wages peaked in 1967) continually confronted non-violent fantasies of peace and

love with more bitter realities.”<sup>89</sup> The idealism that persisted in other places was especially untenable in Detroit. Born in 1954, Kelley came of age just as the ensuing disgruntlement was surfacing. What remained, he recalls, “was only isolation, and a sense of being betrayed.”

The strange brew of avant-garde experimentation and populism of late 60s acid rock had failed in its social promises. To someone of my age...there was definitely a feeling of resentment at having missed the short hedonistic flowering of this dream. These fantasies were only then available on records stolen at K Mart or the mall along with other packaged fantasies...And by the time you got these records, the “stars” who made them were already in decline: dead, drugged out, or producing corporate rock. Where was my utopia? Where was my free sex? Nowhere to be seen. It only existed in a corporate dream of packaged freedom.<sup>90</sup>

For Kelley and his Detroit cohorts, the post-sixties letdown came early and hard.

The jaded perspective inherited by Kelley’s generation carried over to the campus of the University of Michigan, where Kelley attended college from 1972 to 1976. In fact, he specifically links Destroy All Monsters to conditions in both Detroit and Ann Arbor.

As he explains,

We were in the dark ages. Detroit’s economy had collapsed and taken with it its radical culture. Detroit was a dead city. And Ann Arbor, once the “drug capital of the Midwest”, Eden to every unhappy teen-age runaway, home of the SDS, the White Panther Party, and a thriving radical intellectual scene, was now slipping back into being a sleepy and conservative fraternity-row college town. Things were very depressing. This was the milieu that birthed Destroy All Monsters. We were designed to be a “fuck you” to the prevailing popular culture.<sup>91</sup>

In “The Brief and Painful Life of Destroy All Monsters,” David B. Livingston reiterates this sentiment, noting that Ann Arbor in 1974 was “a town which...was attempting to

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<sup>89</sup> Marsh, 40.

<sup>90</sup> Kelley, “To the Throne of Chaos.”

<sup>91</sup> Kelley, Liner Notes to Destroy All Monsters box set, *Destroy All Monsters*, n.p.

manage the difficult transition between sixties mecca of freedom to post-Nixonian retrograde hick metropolis.”<sup>92</sup> Operating in the wake of the counterculture’s demise, DAM embodies the full manifestation of de-romanticized trash-rock—a new kind of musical criticism steeped in irony, silliness and stupidity—performed with a sardonic grin. The band’s flat-out rejection of idealism was summarized by an exchange in their early-seventies self-interrogation, “Destroy All Monsters Interviews Itself”:

Kelley: Does your music stem from any kind of ideological sources?  
Shaw: I basically don’t believe in anything.<sup>93</sup>

This disenchantment was rooted in the Detroit-area music and art scene. Just prior to this period, that scene was centered at the Detroit Artists’ Workshop, founded in 1964 by poet John Sinclair, photographer Leni Arndt (Sinclair) and others. The group brought together artists, writers, poets, musicians and filmmakers into a kind of bohemian colony.<sup>94</sup> As Nick Sousanis explains in “The Detroit Artists’ Workshop: Threads from the Past, Fabric for the Future” (2004), its ultimate objective was “to create a bridge between culture and politics.”<sup>95</sup> Sinclair’s 1964 “Manifesto” for the group thus speaks against “romantic” myths of the artist, promoting instead a greater sense of social

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<sup>92</sup> David B. Livingston, “The Brief and Painful Life of Destroy All Monsters,” reprinted in *Destroy All Monsters: Geisha This*, n.p.

<sup>93</sup> “Destroy All Monsters Interviews Itself,” reprinted in *Destroy All Monsters: Geisha This*, n.p.

<sup>94</sup> For a thorough history of the Detroit Artists’ Workshop, see <http://www.detroitartistsworkshop.org> and “The Mimeograph Revolution,” by Cary Loren (<http://www.thedetroiter.com/nov04/mimeograph.html>).

<sup>95</sup> Nick Sousanis, “The Detroit Artists’ Workshop: Threads from the Past, Fabric for the Future” (<http://www.thedetroiter.com/nov04/daw.html>).

awareness and community involvement.<sup>96</sup> The Workshop is noteworthy for its interdisciplinary and non-hierarchical approach to culture, and, acknowledging this, Marsh sees it as influencing Kelley’s artistic strategy. “He found himself situated in a place where both the making and the using of popular culture had assumed particularly distinct, even conscious form,” Marsh explains.<sup>97</sup>

Kelley was himself affiliated with an offshoot of the Detroit Artists’ Workshop—the explicitly political White Panther Party—formed by Sinclair in November 1968 on the campus of the University of Michigan.<sup>98</sup> While there, Kelley was interested in the Party’s activity. As he remembers it, their goal was to act out, “making one’s life into a kind of radical street theater. The purpose of this exercise was to render oneself unfit to function in normal society, and thus to prevent oneself from participating in and prolonging it.” He views his association with this group as critical to his own artistic development. “My interest drew me to related avant-garde music, theater, film and political events,” he recalls. “This was what led me to become an artist, which is quite remarkable, since I came from a working-class background and had little or no exposure to the fine arts as a child.”<sup>99</sup>

In Michigan, the band that most succinctly embodied sixties radicalized rock was the MC5, declared the official “White Panther Band” and managed by Sinclair himself.

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<sup>96</sup> John Sinclair, “The Artists’ Workshop Society: A ‘Manifesto,’” 1964, reprinted: <http://www.detroitartistsworkshop.org/About/Manifesto/AWSManifesto2.htm>.

<sup>97</sup> Marsh, 41.

<sup>98</sup> Marsh, 40.

<sup>99</sup> Mike Kelley, *Cross-Gender...*, FP, 102.

Billed as a “guerilla attack band,” it “overlaid counterculture style with overt leftist politics,” as Michael Cary explains in his dissertation, *The Rise and Fall of the MC5: Rock Music and Counterculture Politics In The Sixties* (1985).<sup>100</sup> In fact, the MC5 were one of the most openly political bands of the era, an image largely established by Sinclair’s promotion of the group. “Music is one of the most vital revolutionary forces in the West,” he insisted in “Rock and Roll is a Weapon of Cultural Revolution” (1968).<sup>101</sup> Sinclair prophesized a “huge apocalyptic flash,”<sup>102</sup> ignited by the music, and from whose ashes a new future would rise. However, while the revolutionary rhetoric that surrounded the band was enough to irritate the record industry, the music club scene, and occasionally the police, it was largely devoid of any real political consequences—a fact clear to most critics at the time.<sup>103</sup> As Cary points out, the band fell into the same trap as its contemporaries, “underestimate[ing] the power of the system to squelch dissent,” and

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<sup>100</sup> Michael Cary, *The Rise and Fall of the MC5: Rock Music and Counterculture Politics In The Sixties* (Ph.D. dissertation, Lehigh University, 1985), 86. The MC5—short for Motor City Five—was started in 1964 by Wayne Kramer and Fred Smith, lead and rhythm guitars, singer Rob Tyner, bassist Pat Burrows, and drummer Bob Gaspar. The latter two eventually left the band and were replaced by Michael Davis on bass, Dennis Thomson on drums. In 1967, John Sinclair became their manager (Cary, 47-49).

<sup>101</sup> John Sinclair, “Rock and Roll is a Weapon of Cultural Revolution” (1968), reprinted in *Guitar Army: Street Writings/Prison Writings* (New York: Douglas Book Corporation, 1972), 113.

<sup>102</sup> Sinclair, preface, *Guitar Army*, 46.

<sup>103</sup> Cary, 145. In a 1970 Village Voice review, for example, Richard Goldstein praised the MC5 not for being revolutionary, but for their mastery of traditional rock conventions. “Up onstage,” he noted, “they do the Chuck Berry cakewalk, the Little Richard split, the James Brown kneedrop, the Jackie Wilson leap” (Richard Goldstein, *Village Voice* column reprinted in *Goldstein’s Greatest Hits* (Engelwood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1970), 138). Indeed, MC5 performances were successful rehashings of old-fashioned rock-n-roll histrionics.

therefore failing to carry out their ideological strategy. “The fortunes of the MC5,” he concludes, “paralleled, in rhythm and outcome, the protest movements of the sixties considered together.”<sup>104</sup> As both a supreme example of sixties-style musical politics and one of its last gasps, the band stood at an historical threshold between the twilight of hippiedom and the skid into disillusionment. Their militancy only underscored the growing impotence of the counterculture and its rapidly shrinking potential for progressive change.

Kelley was himself a fan of the MC5, and he credits them—along with a limited selection of contemporaneous psychedelic bands—with having “completely altered my worldview.” “When I first heard psychedelic music, it was as if I had discovered myself,” he explains. “[It] made sense to me—it mirrored the nature of the world as I understood it, and that of my own psyche.” Yet, while the music was personally enlightening, by the time it reached Kelley’s ears its “radicalism” was rather passé. The “guise of radical youth culture” adopted by these musicians was, he explains, specific to a bygone era, in which “artists...still considered themselves *avant-garde*, a notion still conceivable in [the late sixties].” Thus, he points out, “‘progressive’ psychedelic music emerged, formally, in concert with notions of progressive social change, a liaison that, while it quickly fell apart...was still operable at that moment.”<sup>105</sup> Exposed to this music only a few years later, Kelley was ambivalent—inspired by its sound, but wary of its politics. As Marsh points out,

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<sup>104</sup> Cary, 148-153.

<sup>105</sup> Mike Kelley, “Cross-Gender/Cross-Genre,” 102-03.

although nominally associated with the White Panthers, Kelley had little truck with their politicized prurience. Instead he favored the Stooges, an aesthetic choice that prefigured his art. The MC5 asked, “Are you part of the problem or part of the solution?” “Problem,” the Stooges replied, without missing a beat (for perhaps the only time in their careers). That band’s stage shows consisted more of psychodrama and ritual abuse of both musical procedures and their audience than of anything that could then pass for rock and roll.<sup>106</sup>

Openly rejecting the MC5’s last-ditch efforts to re-radicalize counterculture music, Destroy All Monsters turned their attention to the musical forms themselves, focusing on their potential for cultural critique without buying into outmoded promises of progressive social transformation. Though the band was influenced by the Detroit Artists’ Workshop, the White Panthers and the MC5, it was the irreverent leveling of hierarchies between music and art by these groups—rather than their politics—that left an impression on the younger musicians. Saturated in black humor, Destroy All Monsters was a Midwest counterpart to the LAFMS—Extended Organ and Gobbler being direct descendants of both. Void of polemic, all of these bands offer a politics of perversion and dissonance. The resulting discord of sounds, references and categories effectively dismantles conventions, exposing the relative conventionality of more mainstream modes and implicitly calling into question corresponding claims of sixties-style rock-n-roll radicalism.

As mentioned, Pettibon also writes and performs music, though not as part of any single group or collective. He tends to form single-project bands, such as Sür Drone, with whom he released an eponymous album of farcical songs (1998) including “Sagitariass’uh,” (track 8) “Booty Ooty Girrl” (track 9) and “Space Mutha Succa Mum”

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<sup>106</sup> Marsh, 39-40.

(track 10).<sup>107</sup> With Super Session, he recorded *Torches and Standards* (1990), to which Kelley also contributed.<sup>108</sup> Here, Pettibon takes direct aim at rock conventions, revealing a conception of music-as-material similar to that of Kelley and McCarthy's various anti-band projects. As Kelley describes,

the songs are scripted in various voices and performed in different styles appropriate for them. For example, "The Stoners of Venice" is a Jim Morrison-esque poetic rant recited over an improvised psychedelic jam, while "Ricky's Pickle" is in the voice of a disenchanting Ricky Nelson fan and the music is performed in a laid-back, country rock style.<sup>109</sup>

For the most part, however, such rock-and-roll send-ups belong to Pettibon's later career. Though he once played bass in a band called Panic (1976-77),<sup>110</sup> his own musical endeavors have been sporadic and relatively recent. Yet he was connected to the Southern California music scene from the mid-seventies through the mid-eighties. In 1978, Pettibon's brother, Greg Ginn, founded SST Records, which quickly became one of the foremost independent record labels of the time.<sup>111</sup> The artist's drawings appear on numerous record album covers and concert flyers for SST bands (fig. 29), and all of his zines were published and distributed through SST from 1982 to 1986. It is not surprising,

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<sup>107</sup> Sir Drone, *Sir Drone* (Los Angeles: Love Unlimited, 1998).

<sup>108</sup> Raymond Pettibon and Super Session, *Torches and Standards* (London: Blast First, 1990).

<sup>109</sup> Kelley, "Sir Drone (1988)," in *Minor Histories*, 197.

<sup>110</sup> Steven Blush, *American Hardcore: A Tribal History* (Los Angeles: Feral House, 2001), 54.

<sup>111</sup> Formed in 1978, SST produced records for Black Flag, as well as bands such as the Minutemen, the Meat Puppets, Husker Du, Saccharine Trust, and Firehose. For a history of the label, see "The SST Records Story" (1998) by Dave Lang: <http://www.furious.com/perfect/sst1.html>.

therefore, that rock culture has been a consistent subject for Pettibon. It was one of the first to emerge when, in the early 1980s, he turned his pen to the sixties counterculture. Indeed, of the three artists discussed here, it is Pettibon who most frankly and methodically attacks popular music in his visual art, presenting rock radicalism as either a tired fad or a dangerous instrument of delusion.

In an untitled drawing from 1985 (fig. 30), for example, a fifties-type family glares down upon a mop-topped adolescent with an acoustic guitar. “YOU CAN KEEP THE GUITAR BUT THE HAIR’S GOTTA GO,” the father instructs. “AH CAIN’T [sic],” the youth responds, “THE HAIR CAME WITH THE GUITAR, ALL THE WAY FROM HOLLYWORD [sic], CALIFORNIA. AND YOU CAN’T PLAY ONE WITHOUT THE OTHER.” Satirizing the codification of rock-and-roll into a pre-packaged style, the drawing depicts the commercial exportation of that style from its urban origins to the suburban and, in this case, rural outskirts—as connoted by the crude Southern accent of the boy. The work suggests that rock’s standard uniform of supposed rebelliousness—long hair and a guitar—can now be mail-ordered by adolescents everywhere.

When Pettibon’s drawings imply that the music might actually be more than an impotent trend, it is never in the ways intended by its musicians and fans. In one of his earliest confrontations with sixties music, an imageless drawing from the first *Tripping Corpse* zine (1981) (fig. 31), “HELTER SKELTER” appears across the center of the page, an allusion to the Manson Family’s cryptic, blood-scrawled words left on the walls of their victims’ homes. The most infamous of these phrases, “Helter Skelter” was an allusion to the 1968 Beatles song of that name, which Manson interpreted as a personal

message from the band.<sup>112</sup> According to the cult-leader, the song prophesized a race riot that would ultimately end in Armageddon and which justified his own killings. An aspiring rock musician himself, Manson saw the Beatles' eponymous "White Album," on which this song appears, as a precursor to his own album, which he claimed would ignite this apocalyptic revolution.<sup>113</sup>

The work thus complicates the notion of musical radicalism by spotlighting its most fanatical, murderous manifestation. However, Pettibon couples this allusion with a facetious caption at the bottom—"GUNS DON'T KILL PEOPLE. SONGS DO."—a play on the NRA-inspired defense of the Second Amendment, "Guns don't kill people, people do." Pettibon's heavy-handed modification of this slogan mocks the admonition of popular music as immoral and dangerous (often by people who, paradoxically enough, also support gun rights). His attacks operate not just against rock-and-roll conceits, but also against its reactionary condemnation. This not only includes the conservative opposition to rock culture in the 1960s, but the neoconservative revival of such condemnations in the 1980s—most notably directed at heavy metal and hip-hop.<sup>114</sup>

As the quintessential sign of rock's perilous potential, the bloody "Helter Skelter" could be considered evidence in support of these critiques. Yet, the overtly lame logic of Pettibon's caption undermines such judgments, exposing them as similarly naïve

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<sup>112</sup> "Helter Skelter" is on The Beatles' eponymous album, common referred to as "The White Album" (Apple Records, 1968).

<sup>113</sup> For a discussion of Manson's interpretations of "Helter Skelter" and other Beatles songs, see Bugliosi, 321-31.

<sup>114</sup> This culminated in the US Senate's "Record Labeling, Senate Hearing 99-259" (September, 1985), and will be discussed later in this chapter.

exaggerations of music's ability to influence actual behavior. To blame the Manson murders on the Beatles is patently absurd. However, that is essentially the type of reasoning used to justify hostility toward rock-and-roll since its inception. It is also not unlike the thinking that inversely casts rock as a politically radical force, an agent of progressive change. Underlying Pettibon's drawing is the recognition that the hippie who celebrates rock as revolutionary, the mass murderer who uses it to justify his crimes, and the conservative who condemns it as dangerous all buy into the same fiction—that popular music is truly subversive, if not cataclysmic.

Hence, as in Pettibon's more general treatments of the sixties, Manson becomes an effective way to criticize certain sixties myths, while countering the era's subsequent mythologization. A hippie gone haywire, Manson exposed contradictions within society's most sacred categories by clouding their distinctions, mixing utopianism and nazism, faith and fanaticism, Christianity and Satanism, the Beatles and the Bible. In another untitled drawing from 1985 (fig. 32), a maniacal naked bohemian with bloody arms is surrounded by a surfeit of text. Among rambling ruminations on the White Album, we hear various testimonials that may or may not be from the depicted longhair. "THE NEW BEATLES BLEW ME AWAY. AGAIN.," one declares, "LOUD, LOUDER STILL: DO WE CUT OURSELVES NEW VOLUME KNOBS TO TAKE IT ALL IN?" Another rejoices, "MY HANDS BECOME CAKED FULL OF BLOODY GORE—BUT THE WHITE ALBUM STAYS THE SAME! THE END IS NEAR—HELTER SKELTER COME STRUMMING DOWN." The peace-loving hippie is thus recast into a Manson disciple, whose loss of innocence and goodwill is attributed to a rock-and-roll record. Again, the coupling of chilling image and darkly humorous text

satirizes the overestimation of rock's supposed profundity on the one hand, while caricaturing alarmist censures of the music on the other.

This latter side of the issue had, in fact, reemerged in the mid-1980s, just as Pettibon was producing such critiques. For example, in his best-seller, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (1987), Allan Bloom reproaches rock-and-roll for corrupting American youths. Though he rightly chastises the Left for its uncritical appraisal of the music, Bloom offers his own extremist assessment in response. Describing it as “junk food for the soul” and more dangerous than pornography, he sees the music as a primary cause of America's cultural decline, blaming it for “parents' loss of control over their children's moral education.” According to Bloom,

it is of historic proportions that a society's best young and their best energies should be so occupied. People of future civilizations will wonder at this and find it as incomprehensible as we do the caste system, witch burning, harems, cannibalism and gladiatorial combats.<sup>115</sup>

Like the youth culture he lambastes, Bloom exaggerates the actual power of rock music, characterizing it as a vehicle of real social and psychological change. Pettibon's parodies effectively link these supposedly opposite sides—rock's most ardent champions and detractors—portraying both as hyperbolic and misguided.

Similar works connect the belief in the revolutionary value of rock-and-roll to the capriciousness of the counterculture movement and the disillusionment stemming from its failures. The subject emerges regularly throughout the *Tripping Corpse* series. *Tripping Corpse Eleven* (1988) (fig. 33), for example, features a dead woman strewn

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<sup>115</sup> Bloom, 73-77.

across her bed with a hypodermic needle sticking out of her arm. “THIS ONE’S FOR YOU, JANIS,” it declares. Here, it is hardcore drug use that is cast as a sign of lost innocence, of failed utopia. Like Altamont, the infamous dope-induced deaths of Janis Joplin (1970, heroin), Jimi Hendrix (1970, barbiturates) and Jim Morrison (1971, probably heroin) seemed to signal the end of the counterculture. A drawing from *Tripping Corpse Twelve* (1990) (fig. 34) sums up the sentiment. Here, two men are shown carrying a corpse on a gurney. “WE’VE GOT ANOTHER WOODSTOCKER,” one explains. “O.D?” the other asks. “WELL, SHE WASN’T LOVED TO DEATH.”

Bob Dylan also serves as a symbol of sixties music and its decline. An untitled drawing from 1982 (fig. 35), for example, depicts a silhouette of Dylan with halo around his head. “OF COURSE HE BECAME A CHRISTIAN,” the caption sardonically explains, an allusion to the improbable conversion of the Jewish former countercultural icon to Christianity in 1979. Indeed, the explicit declarations of faith on Dylan’s *Slow Train Coming* (1979)—which includes songs such as “When You Gonna Wake Up?,” essentially an anti-Marxist, anti-drug, anti-adultery, anti-pornography evangelical sermon—are among the most astounding ironies of the post-sixties era.<sup>116</sup> This apparent betrayal of sixties ideals is also the subject of an untitled drawing from 1985 (fig. 36), in which a hippie-ish guy strums a guitar while sitting on a bed next to a gun. “DON’T THINK OF IT AS GETTING RID OF BOB DYLAN,” reads a caption, “THINK OF IT AS PRESERVING THE OLD BOB DYLAN, THE ONE WE LOVE.” Apparently, these fans are responding to Dylan’s treachery by planning the rock star’s assassination.

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<sup>116</sup> For a discussion of Dylan’s conversion to Christianity, see Paul William, *Dylan: What Happened? How and Why Did Dylan Become a Born-Again Christian?* (Glen Ellen, CA: Entwistel Books, 1980).

However, Pettibon's snide remark on the cover of *New Wave Gravy*—that “of course he became a Christian”—characterizes the conversion as self-evident, rather than incongruous. It implies that supposed opposites such as counterculture and Christianity, liberalism and conservatism might be more aligned than they initially appear.

Even more damning is Pettibon's 1989 video, *The Whole World is Watching: Weatherman '69*, a searing lampoon of the counterculture in general. The work is a “mockumentary” of the Weather Underground, a militant group of self-declared revolutionaries that emerged in the late-1960s. For Pettibon, the Weathermen perfectly personified the contradictions of the era. By the 1980s, it was clear that the group was the embodiment not of radical change, as they claimed, but of a defunct idealism. As Milton Viorst succinctly puts it in *Fire in the Streets: America in the 1960s* (1979), “they believed they were the vanguard of a great revolution. Instead, their role in history was to mark the end of a movement.”<sup>117</sup>

In Pettibon's video, the Weather Underground is presented as a bumbling bunch of privileged, whiney ignoramuses who spend their time pondering the virtues of multicolored toothbrushes, condemning baseball for being too capitalist, and arguing over whether they can keep their Levi's and still be radical. And music is clearly a central inspiration for the group.<sup>118</sup> The opening scene, for example, features a heated debate over the revolutionary value of various records—the determining factor in deciding

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<sup>117</sup> Milton Viorst, *Fire in the Streets: America in the 1960s* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 504.

<sup>118</sup> In a clever twist that links the illusions of the past to those of the present, Pettibon casts 1980s musicians to play the founding members of the Weather Underground. Sonic Youth's Thurston Moore and Kim Gordon, for example, play Jeff Jones and Bernadine Dohrn respectively, and Minutemen bassist Mike Watt plays Gabe Nemisch.

which to smash and which to salvage. “If you're not into Coltrane,” one participant adamantly insists, “go join the other side.”<sup>119</sup> Introducing herself as the “Weathermen’s balls,” meanwhile, founding member Bernardine Dohrn is presented as the leader of the group, though the platitudes she spews forth are no less inane. “Let’s get something straight,” she declares at one point, “premature ejaculation is a symptom of late capitalist, racist white male rule.” “Right on!” a supporter confirms, “the Chinese and the Russians know how to treat their women!” Throughout the video, the group is visited by various counterculture celebrities, whose own utterly mindless commentary equals that of the Weathermen. The meeting between Dohrn and John Lennon, for example, includes the following exchange:

Lennon: Do you think we can bring down the government?

Dohrn: We’ll need a lot of help from the entertainment industry.

Lennon: You don’t have a queen in the States, do you?...Shouldn’t be too difficult, then, for an overthrow.

Pettibon’s video thus portrays the most extreme faction of the counterculture movement as nothing more than a group of frivolous, pseudo-Marxist windbags, their rock-and-roll revolutionaries as equally vapid. Though considerably more ruthless, such works echo the music-oriented caricatures of Kelley, McCarthy and those that influenced them. Without resorting to reactionary derision, Pettibon similarly discounts the rebellious pretenses of sixties music, short-circuiting both its exaltation and reproach by portraying it as thoroughly impotent. Yet, his parodies are also implicitly targeted at more

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<sup>119</sup> Raymond Pettibon, *The Whole World is Watching: Weatherman ’69* (1989). Full script in *Raymond Pettibon: Plots Laid Thick* (Barcelona: Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 2002), 237-310.

contemporaneous musical movements, which sought to recuperate rock rebelliousness despite that impotence.

### **To Shock is Chic**

If it's not the most trenchant critique of subculture ever produced, it certainly is the pithiest. In an untitled Pettibon drawing from 1985 (fig. 37), a Mohawk-headed punk-rocker in his underwear shoots up in the corner of a room. A single quote looms overhead:

“I WAS BORN AT WOODSTOCK.”

Lead-in its impact, this minimal line links two of the most significant popular music movements in recent memory. Punk is presented as the literal and metaphorical offspring of the sixties counterculture. All the contradictions of the Woodstock generation have, the work suggests, been passed on to its punk progeny. Thus, Pettibon's drawing sums up the history of postwar youth culture—a cycle of idealism lost, recuperated, and lost again. For all its anti-hippie posturing, punk ended just as the counterculture did: with a proverbial hypodermic needle pressed under the skin. The haircuts were simply shorter, the uniforms inverted.

Indeed, to Pettibon, hippies and punks represent two sides of the same coin, and by the mid-1980s, the crossover between these supposed opposites had become a central theme of his work. In another untitled drawing from 1985 (fig. 38), for example, a bearded long-hair appears like an apparition before a shirtless punk, who, recuperating a core symbol of counterculture demise, has scrawled “HELTER SKELTER” on the wall. The hippie has come to help him fine-tune his technique. “SOMEBODY'S GOTTA

LEARN YOU PUNKERS HOW TO DO IT RIGHT,” he declares. “FIRST OF ALL, YOU DON’T USE PAINT, YOU USE FRESH BLOOD. FRESH PIG BLOOD.”

Again, the sixties counterculture is cast as the progenitor of punk, which in turn is depicted as a mindless rehashing of hippie delusions.

Such confluences comprise *New Wave Gravy 2*, a Pettibon zine also from 1985. Violence and hypocrisy are here portrayed as the essential qualities underlying both subcultures. One drawing depicts a close-up of a hand holding an electric guitar neck over drops of blood and dismembered body parts scattered on the floor (fig. 39). “I’VE HEARD SOME PRETTY WILD STORIES ABOUT THAT BAND,” an unseen voice remarks. Is this one of Pettibon’s Manson-inspired images, or does it refer to the punk scene, the subject of the rest of the zine? The ambiguity is, of course, intentional. The work is another double-caricature, satirizing the idealization of rock unruliness on one hand, and the exaggerated condemnation of it on the other. A compendium of such critiques, *New Wave Gravy 2* reflects its mid-eighties post-punk moment, the aftermath of a subculture cast in opposition to hippie ideals, but whose demise mirrored that of its sixties predecessor. Pettibon thus looks back on both music-centered movements, drawing parallels between them and exposing both as problematic. Punk is, in this sense, a perfect subject for Pettibon. Doubly delusional, its performers, fans and commentators not only believed this music to be genuinely subversive, but did so despite the spectacular failure of such faith less than a decade prior. With punk, Pettibon could criticize both the concept of musical rebellion and the collective amnesia that allows for such a concept to be recycled regardless of its increasingly obvious flaws.

Emerging in the late seventies, punk positioned itself against the perceived insularity and escapism of post-sixties rock. Seeking to rein in the musical indulgences of the decade and reestablish a critical edginess, it struck an intensely anti-social, if not downright nihilistic, tone. Most often, the targets of its rage were the apparent conservatism and excessive commercialism of the music industry itself, which was vilified as an instrument of mass social conformity. Offering a stripped-down, unpolished sound, coupled with belligerent tell-it-like-it-is lyrics, punk provided an angry voice to a dissatisfied and pessimistic cohort of young people living in the seventies wake of failed sixties idealism.<sup>120</sup>

Though many of its key progenitors were American, punk began as a British movement. Consisting mainly of working-class white youths,<sup>121</sup> it was primarily organized around the issue of unemployment, which in England had risen sharply by 1975.<sup>122</sup> The UK's mid-seventies economic outlook was bleak, and songs such as the Sex Pistols' "God Save the Queen" (1977) articulated the deep pessimism of the moment:

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<sup>120</sup> As proto-punk musician Richard Hell has explained, "the whole thing we were doing at the time, the whole intention was to deliver on stage your core self without any filters—to be the same off stage as on stage—because rock and roll at that time was all pretentious stadium glitter. There were bands playing, like Yes and Emerson, Lake and Palmer...They were the dregs of the sixties with this revolting new development—imitating classical music. So we wanted to destroy that and bring the music back to real kids" (Richard Hell, in "Punk and History," discussion between Malcolm McLaren, Richard Hell, Stephen Sprouse, Griel Marcus, John Savage and Paul Taylor, in *Discourses: Conversations in Postmodern Art and Culture*, ed. Russell Ferguson, et al [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990], 235).

<sup>121</sup> Tricia Henry, *Break All Rules!*, quoted in *The Philosophy of Punk: More Than Noise!*, by Craig O'Hara (San Francisco: AK Press, 1999), 27.

<sup>122</sup> Street, 76-78.

God save the queen we mean it man  
 There is no future in England's dreaming  
 No future for you no future for me  
 No future no future for you.<sup>123</sup>

By the end of the seventies, however, punk had become the music of choice for an increasingly prominent subculture in the United States. Yet, while American youths embraced the raw sound and angry poses of their English brethren, they did so largely without a precise political agenda, leading critics to question its efficacy. In “Real Punks and Pretenders: The Social Organization of a Counterculture” (1987), for example, Kathryn Joan Fox remarks that “whether or not the punk scene in the United States could be legitimately classified as a social movement is debatable,” since unlike the British version, American punk “was more clearly connected to style than to politics.”<sup>124</sup> But, such accounts tend to sell the US variant short. For whereas the messages it conveyed tended to be less pointed, the Americans effectively expanded the movement, developing a sound, scene and style that could express anti-social sentiments and youthful frustration in all its forms. It was American punks who homed in on the subversive potential of the music itself.

Punk was, in this sense, a revival of rock-and-roll politics—less a break with sixties counterculture than a return to one of its core principles, as Pettibon’s drawings imply. Despite its wholesale condemnation of anything that smacked of hippiedom, punk

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<sup>123</sup> “God Save the Queen” is off of *Never Mind the Bullocks Here’s the Sex Pistols* (Warner Brothers, 1977).

<sup>124</sup> Kathryn Joan Fox, “Real Punks and Pretenders: The Social Organization of a Counterculture” (1987) in *Constructions of Deviance: Social Power, Context, and Interaction*, ed. Patricia A. Adler and Peter Adler (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1994), 373.

was “a re-assertion of rock’s traditional virtues: honesty, rebellion, integrity,” as Street points out.<sup>125</sup> In a 1981 essay, “The End of Liberalism,” artist and critic Dan Graham describes punk as “a reexamination of the co-option and failure of rock in the late sixties.”<sup>126</sup> However, in its prioritization of individual freedom over the “establishment,” it essentially embraced much the same strategy as the predecessors it claimed to disdain. Once again, popular music was posited as a unifying force against conventional culture and imbued with the potential to effect significant social change. Punk was indeed born at Woodstock.

This sentiment underlies another Pettibon video from 1989, the intentionally irritating *Sir Drone*, which follows the moronic antics of Jinx and Dwayne—played by Kelley and Minutemen bassist Mike Watt, respectively—as they sit around in their underwear, whining, bickering, and banging on guitars.<sup>127</sup> The story centers on their inane attempt to form a punk band, yet it quickly becomes clear that they have no musical abilities whatsoever. It hardly matters, though. The greater imperative is to come up with a hip name for their band; “The Abraham Lincoln Youth Brigade,” “The Consumers,” “The Glue-Sniffers” and “The Men From Punkle” are some of the idiotic possibilities they debate. Meanwhile, Dwayne nags Jinx to cut his long hair and slice his fingers on the guitar strings “like Johnny Ramone when you play so blood comes out.” “Can I fake it?,” Jinx queries. They drink beer and fashion home-made tattoos under a

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<sup>125</sup> Street, 85.

<sup>126</sup> Dan Graham, “The End of Liberalism” (1981), in *Rock My Religion: Writings and Art Projects, 1965-1990*, ed. Brian Wallis (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 78.

<sup>127</sup> Raymond Pettibon, *Sir Drone* (1989). Full script in Raymond Pettibon, *Plots Laid Thick*, 345-92.

picture of Sex Pistols guitarist Sid Vicious taped to the wall. Because that, they contend, is what it means to be punk. Such a pathetic bunch of losers has rarely graced the screen, big or small.

*Sir Drone* is a hilarious and caustic critique of punk rock pretensions. Yet, it also implicates the sixties counterculture, portrayed as no less frivolous. Jinx, for example, is caught between the conformist forces of both—he refuses to get a haircut because, Duane explains, “his hippie mom won’t let him!” As suggested throughout the video, to be hippie is to have long hair and preach utopian platitudes, while to be punk is to have short hair and preach dystopian ones. Again, Pettibon conflates the Woodstock generation and its punk descendants, both portrayed as hollow and conventional. Like their counterculture predecessors, Jinx and Duane intend their music to be “political,” offering songs such as this:

I spit on the rich (capitalists!)  
I spit on the poor (industrialists!)  
I take gobs of spit  
And semen too  
And stick it in your hair!

Duane complains, however, insisting that Jinx must replace “semen” with “mucus” because “lyrics are important.” Meanwhile, the fact that they cannot really play their instruments is not only not a problem, it’s a plus. “I make up my own chords,” boasts Jinx, “I play real. I play myself.”

*Sir Drone* is less a parody of punk’s actual practitioners, many of whom were in fact accomplished musicians, than of the popular romanticization of it—the notion that it represented a more honest form of music. Specifically, Pettibon targets the presumption that punk’s austere, stripped-down aesthetic and crude fashions signal an increased

authenticity. Of course, Jinx and Duane take this to an extreme, suggesting that they are more “real” for not knowing how to play. As caricatures, however, they call attention to a core punk myth, a kind of primitivism that equates a lack of virtuosity—the reliance on basic chords, simple beats and in-your-face lyrics—with bare-bones truth and authority.

This notion of punk as a grassroots enterprise resembles the conception of folk-inspired protest music in the early sixties, when raw, unadorned form was similarly equated with purity and integrity. In “Formalism, Realism and Leisure: The Case of Punk” (1980), sociologist Simon Frith notes this correlation, pointing out that punk was almost immediately viewed as subculture’s folk music due to its penchant for frank emotional expression.<sup>128</sup> Similarly, Richard Hell, whose various bands—the Neon Boys, Television, the Heartbreakers, the Voidoids—are counted as some of punk’s leading innovators, has recently commented that he always thought of it “as genuine urban kids’ folk music.”<sup>129</sup> Yet, by the time of punk’s peak in the late seventies, folk music’s status as a medium of political activism was shaky at best. Its tendency to advance polemical positions that reduce the complexities of contemporary life to strict dichotomies such as us and them, right and wrong, good and bad—oppositions that indeed sat at the core of the punk sensibility—rendered the format politically obsolete.<sup>130</sup> As Street points out,

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<sup>128</sup> Simon Frith, “Formalism, Realism and Leisure: The Case of Punk” (1980), in *The Subcultures Reader*, ed. Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 166-7.

<sup>129</sup> Hell, 235.

<sup>130</sup> For examples of cultural critics and sociologists who have problematized, if not outright rejected, the notion of punk as effective resistance, see Part Three of *The Subcultures Reader*, especially Stanley Cohen’s “Symbols of Trouble” (1980) and Simon Frith’s “Formalism, Realism and Leisure” (1980).

Using folk to make a protest is inevitably to embrace a format in which certainty takes a priority over endless confusions. While such techniques may work in a demonstration, they are ineffective in the typical settings and mood—in private and for pleasure—in which people hear music.<sup>131</sup>

And yet, progressive American critics excitedly embraced punk as something radically new and subversive.<sup>132</sup> Many of punk's most prominent advocates—journalists such as Lester Bangs, Richard Meltzer, and Greil Marcus—were, however, children of the sixties, clinging to the possibility of a truly revolutionary musical form. Marcus, for example, celebrated punk as a transformative political movement—as “a restaging or a recapitulation” of sixties counterculture<sup>133</sup>—whose central tenet was the idea that “a demystification of rock ‘n’ roll might lead to a demystification of social life.”<sup>134</sup> In a 1978 article on the prototypical British punk band, the Clash, he claimed that they “have

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<sup>131</sup> Street, 156.

<sup>132</sup> This was, in fact, characteristic of the liberal response on both sides of the Atlantic. As Frith points out, “within a few months of its public emergence in 1977, ... virtually every left paper agreed that Punk was a Good Thing” (Frith, 166-7). And indeed, according to Street, “it was the writers, rather than the musicians, who gave punk its social meaning” (Street, 84-85). In 1977, for example, *Slash* magazine reporter Claude Bessy (a.k.a. Kickboy Face), one of the L.A. music scene's leading commentators, noted the significance of the then-recent US invasion of the Sex Pistols: “The sweet sound of chaos. Johnny Rotten sneering and spitting his absolute refusal of anything that is anything. One long fuzzy overloaded riff that is the greatest rejection of studio rock since god knows when” (Claude Bessy, *Slash*, 1977, quoted in *Forming: The Early Days of L.A. Punk*, ed. Exene Cervenka, Susan Martin, Kristine McKenna, Holly Meyers, Pilar Perez, Viggo Mortensen, John Roeker [Santa Monica, CA: Smart Art Press, 1999], 6). In retrospect, this celebration of the Pistols' sound and image seems rather naïve, since the group was actually the product of manager Malcolm McLaren's now-infamous marketing scheme—his calculated attempt to assemble and promote, in his words, “a band of kids who could be perceived as being bad” (McLaren, “Punk and History,” 225).

<sup>133</sup> Marcus, “Punk and History,” 232.

<sup>134</sup> Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U. Press, 1989), 56.

been understood as ‘political’ for the right reasons: because more than other bands, they saw in punk proof that apparently trivial questions of music and style profoundly threatened those who ran their society.”<sup>135</sup> Such views—predominant in both America and England<sup>136</sup>—caused Leftwing critics to ignore the history and orthodoxy of the movement. As Frith notes, “punk for them was a transparent image of a real youth condition... a direct expression of the way things were—a kind of realism.” This overlooked the fact that punk relied heavily upon mainstream rock conventions, on “melodic structures and a rhythmic base which told-it-like-it-was *because* they followed rock ‘n’ roll rules.” The idealistic pronouncements of punk’s advocates, Frith concludes, “involved not cultural analysis but a purely rhetorical optimism.”<sup>137</sup>

Consequently, punk’s shelf-life as a radical art form was about as long as that of its sixties’ predecessor; it was almost immediately absorbed into the system. Though its look was one of anti-fashion, its culture of crudeness was quickly codified into a distinct and recognizable style. By the end of the seventies, it was clear that punk was as dependent on a specific musical and visual mode—and the successful communication of the meanings imbedded in that style—as any of its seemingly more spectacular rock predecessors. With regards to the sixties counterculture, it simply inverted the signs, exchanging long hair for short, love for hate, utopia for dystopia. Even anger itself

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<sup>135</sup> Greil Marcus, “The Clash” (1978), in *Ranters & Crowd Pleasers: Punk in Pop Music, 1977-92* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 29.

<sup>136</sup> British critic Jon Savage has, for example, claimed that the movement was not one of nihilism but “one of great optimism; less a manifestation of cynicism, but on the contrary one of idealism” (Savage, “Punk and History,” 237).

<sup>137</sup> Frith, 167-68.

quickly became another hollow symbol, for as one of L.A. punk's leading proponents, *Slash* magazine reporter Claude Bessy (a.k.a. Kickboy Face), came to realize in 1979, "by now only the lettuce at Safeway [supermarket] don't look angry."<sup>138</sup>

All of this only fueled the entertainment industry, which shrewdly packaged the rebellious punk image into yet another eminently marketable fad. In September, 1977, *Cosmopolitan* ran a review of Zandra Rhodes's couture fashion collection, including variations on the theme of punk—models covered in safety pins and plastic—coupled with the aphorism "to shock is chic."<sup>139</sup> In 1979, a store called Poseur, selling punk-style clothes and hair dye, opened in Los Angeles.<sup>140</sup> The imminent demise of punk's subversiveness was thus presaged at the very moment of its rise. By the early eighties, the impotence of the subculture was abundantly clear. As Graham noted in 1981, "the industry doesn't care if the message of rock is anarchistic or antisocial as long as it can make money from the music."<sup>141</sup> That same year, critic Jon Savage—who, in the late seventies, had been one of punk's leading proponents—similarly summed up the growing sense of post-punk disillusionment: "I still like records and things, but I don't make the

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<sup>138</sup> Claude Bessy, "The Others at the Other Masque," quoted in *Forming: The Early Days of L.A. Punk* (Santa Monica, CA: Smart Art Press, 1999), 10.

<sup>139</sup> Quoted in *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, by Dick Hebdige (London and New York: Routledge, 1979), 96.

<sup>140</sup> John Roecker and Sherri Schottlaender, "Time-Line," in *Forming: The Early Days of L.A. Punk* (Los Angeles: Smart Art Press, 1999), 58.

<sup>141</sup> Dan Graham, "McLaren's Children" (1981-8), *Rock My Religion*, 146.

mistake of thinking that they'll fuel the barricades: for in pop there is no Youth Rebellion, only Youth Consumption."<sup>142</sup>

To critic and historian Dick Hebdige, however, the codification of punk into a standard musical and visual style did not preclude its subversiveness. In his renowned study of the movement, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979), Hebdige describes punk as a symbolic dismantling of culture that exposed the arbitrariness of normalcy and the semiotics that reinforce it. He reads punk's trademark symbols, or "styles," as *bricolage*—a technique by which signs are dislocated from their conventional contexts in order to foster reflection on their assumed meanings.<sup>143</sup> The fragmentary punk uniform—ripped t-shirts, patched jackets, safety-pinned pants—is thus understood as an agent of demythologization, as a way to deconstruct fashion itself. While acknowledging that such a style did ultimately turn conventional and commercial,<sup>144</sup> he defends the notion of the movement as a potent resistance to social norms, at least in its initial incarnation. Hebdige's objective is therefore to locate a pure, incendiary incarnation of punk style, capable of engendering real political and social change.<sup>145</sup>

Pettibon view is significantly more pessimistic. His work suggests that, regardless of its surface changes, rock remains a force of conformity rather than rebellion. In fact, Pettibon seems to have greater disdain for the punk subculture than its

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<sup>142</sup> Jon Savage, quoted in Street, 85.

<sup>143</sup> Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London and New York: Routledge, 1979), 102-06.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 94-96.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

sixties predecessor. “You know, at least in the 60s there was a war going on,” he recently complained, “I mean, what the fuck is a battle to punk rockers? Against long hair?”<sup>146</sup> Throughout the pages of *New Wave Gravy 2*, punk is thus presented as just another wave of rock-and-roll conventionalism. The zine’s back cover openly ridicules the movement (fig. 40). Its self-promotional tagline announces “HEY, PUNKS! THIS IS THE BIG ONE! BUY A COPY AND HAVE A FRIEND READ IT TO YOU!” Beneath this advertisement, two naked male punks embrace. They are fans of Black Flag: the boy on the left displays a tattoo of the band’s logo. The other holds out a bouquet, or more precisely, pulls it back. “I HATE FLOWERS, TOO,” he explains with rather pathetic transparency, “I BROUGHT THEM AS A JOKE.” The work desublimates the homoerotics of the punk scene, with its hero-worship and mosh pits of riling male bodies. Coupled with the boy’s anxious quote, it also points to punk’s contradictory forces of conformity and the insecurities underlying the macho-posturing of its participants—the need to measure up to a strictly-defined ideal of aggressive, properly masculine behavior—epitomized here by the pressure to hate flowers.

Another drawing from *New Wave Gravy 2* (fig. 41) depicts a tear rolling down the cheek of an androgynous punk, whose tattoo combines the same Black Flag logo with the slogan, “Roll On Rollins”—a corny tribute to the band’s lead singer, Henry Rollins. “I THOUGHT I COULD MAKE AN IMPRESSION ON HENRY,” the heartbroken fan explains, “AND HE TOLD ME TO PUT MY SHIRT BACK ON.” Here, Pettibon highlights the disjunction of between fantasy and reality—a disparity central to the maintenance of celebrity in all its forms. In this sense, punk is just another form of

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<sup>146</sup> Raymond Pettibon, interview with Grady Turner, *Bomb*, no. 69 (Fall 1999): 47.

popular entertainment, its fans being followers with desires that can never be satisfied. Despite its affectations—its attempt to take on an air of sophistication and jadedness—punk was a spectacular movement centered on rock-and-roll idolatry.

Pettibon's references to Black Flag in *New Wave Gravy 2* are not arbitrary. In fact, most of the drawings here are not actually directed at punk per se, but at one of its most virulent American offshoots. Termed Hardcore, this movement emerged in the late seventies and early eighties as a reaction to punk's rapid popularization and corporatization, and the Los Angeles area was a hotbed in the formation of its early character. Probably the most well-known Hardcore band, Black Flag was formed by Pettibon's publisher and guitar-playing brother, Greg Ginn.<sup>147</sup> Along with numerous SST record album covers and concert flyers that featured his drawings, Pettibon also designed Black Flag's well-known logo—the one tattooed to nearly every punk in *New Wave Gravy 2*. In contrast to the rather esoteric work of DAM, the LAFMS and their progeny, Pettibon was thus affiliated with a relatively mainstream music scene. It was there that he got his start.

The advocates of American Hardcore posited it as a truly rebellious musical style. Punks, by contrast, were viewed as sell-outs, as not-quite-hard-enough, as poseurs whose actions did not live up to their fighting words. Bands like Black Flag, Fear, and Minor Threat responded with an ultra-aggressive, hyper-confrontational form of music driven by short, provocative lyrics that were usually shouted over a repetition of fast, heavy chords. Despite its anti-punk image, however, this musical style was clearly indebted to the its punk predecessors. Fundamental to its development was the belief in the efficacy

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<sup>147</sup> Pettibon's given name is Raymond Ginn.

of punk-type tactics—simplicity, directness, rawness and brutal honesty. Though Hardcore bands ultimately defined themselves in contrast to punk, their musical ferocity derived from its aggressive posturing and cacophonous sound. Hardcore’s participants did not question the subversive potential of popular music; they simply believed that punk had failed to be subversive enough. The implication was that if it had only stayed true, punk could have fulfilled its radical agenda.

In this sense, Hardcore’s strategy was remarkably similar to the last-ditch efforts of the MC5 and John Sinclair to re-radicalize the sixties counterculture. Both attempted to breathe new life into a moribund movement, intensifying an approach already condemned to obsolescence.<sup>148</sup> The fact that American musicians, fans and critics often took punk’s anti-institutional aura at face-value proved crucial to the development of the “politics” of Hardcore. Its strategy was for the most part conventional—a heightened rehashing of punk rebelliousness, itself a rehashing of hippie rebelliousness. And, though its visceral expressionism allowed for an effective emotional release, it was no more effective as a social or political movement than the latter two movements. As Street explains of Hardcore,

the music and the lyrics capture the spirit and feel of suburban teenage angst; and, turned up loud, the sound’s manic rush carries the listener along in its wake. But the momentary relief is where the effect ends; everything in the sound—voice, guitar, drums—is directed to a single sensation: a release of pent-up confusion and frustration.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> In this sense, it is not surprising that the MC5—relegated to virtual obscurity by the end of the 1960s—had resurgence in late 1970s and early 1980s. Labeled “proto-punk” at this time, the band’s first two albums were re-released in the UK in 1977, and in 1982, *Kick Out the Jams* was re-released in the US (Cary, 126).

<sup>149</sup> Street, 211.

This release was accompanied by a self-proclaimed revolution in music production, as “Do It Yourself” (D.I.Y.) record-making became the preeminent Hardcore credo, championed as a way to circumvent the commercial record industry. Though “independent” production had also been a core punk principle, Hardcore bands and fans considered their near-fanatical faith in D.I.Y. as more genuine. As Steven Blush claims in his nostalgic tribute to the scene, *American Hardcore: A Tribal History* (2001), “Punk gave lip service to ‘Do It Yourself’ (D.I.Y.) and democratization of the Rock scene, but Hardcore transcended all commercial and corporate concerns.”<sup>150</sup> Yet, as Frith points out, “‘independent’ records, made by do-it-yourself companies remain commodities.”<sup>151</sup> Again, Hardcore’s efforts were analogous to those of the MC5 and John Sinclair, who proclaimed that rock must free itself from the “capitalist entertainment industry...because in order for it to be fully revolutionary it must have *self-determination* as its economic term, it must be controlled by the people who produce it and the people who use it, *by the community as a whole*, it must be *held in common* by the people whose lives are affected by it.”<sup>152</sup> This declaration is practically a prescription for Hardcore D.I.Y. Yet, even in the early seventies, when Sinclair delivered this call-to-arms, self-produced rock-and-roll was already a tired idea. Independent labels had constituted a large part of the market in the 1960s, when artists such as Chuck Berry, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, the

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<sup>150</sup> Steven Blush, *American Hardcore: A Tribal History*, ed. George Petros (Los Angeles: Feral House, 2001), 275.

<sup>151</sup> Frith, 167-8.

<sup>152</sup> Sinclair, preface, *Guitar Army*, 34.

Airplane, and the Beach Boys also “did it themselves”—a decision that was similarly promoted as anti-institutional.<sup>153</sup>

As with all such efforts, Hardcore’s political and social aspirations could not match the inventiveness of its music, and the scene was quickly absorbed into the mainstream. Once again, the forces of marketing and the lure of big corporate record deals were too powerful, and Hardcore’s irreverence and do-it-yourself anti-commercialism soon went the way of the Sex Pistols. Personally connected to the movement—though always ambivalent towards it—Pettibon targets Hardcore as an especially egregious example of rock-and-roll delusion. His drawings expose the gaps between image and reality that so often cause subcultures to see and present themselves as radical.

Kelley also taps these spaces. In 1976, he left Michigan and Destroy All Monsters for Los Angeles, enrolling Cal Arts’ Graduate Program in Fine Arts. Kelley was drawn to the school for its interdisciplinary approach to art. Intending to further develop his fusion of art and music, he planned to study with electronic music composer Morton Subotnik and Happenings pioneer Allan Kaprow and to participate in Cal Arts’ Electronic and Tape Music Program. Upon arrival, though, he was disappointed to learn Kaprow had recently left the faculty and that art students were actually not permitted to take courses in the music school.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Pichaske, 147-8.

<sup>154</sup> Mike Kelley, “The Poetics: Remixes of Recordings from 1977 to 1983” (1996), liner notes for CD Box Set, <http://www.mikekelley.com/poeticintro.html>.

Kelley therefore returned to the rock-band format in order to satisfy his interest in sonic art. This led to the formation of the Poetics in 1978, by Kelley and fellow art students Tony Oursler and Don Krieger.<sup>155</sup> Like DAM, the Poetics recorded on cheap equipment and embraced crude instrumentation, weird sound effects and stupid humor. At times, Krieger played the “orgatron,” an adapted toy organ remarkably similar to Joe Potts’s “optigon.”<sup>156</sup> Indeed, it was then that Kelley came into contact with the music scene that McCarthy had been a part of for years. (In 1978, McCarthy’s “CLOSE Radio” aired a Poetics work titled “Dream Lover,” a composition described by Kelley as “a fairly elaborate, and cornball, sound piece.”<sup>157</sup>) Kelley acknowledges that when he arrived in Los Angeles, the city was already a hotbed of the kind of hybridization in which he was then interested:

Performance artists like the Kipper Kids and Johanna Went were performing on stage alongside Rock bands; the Screamers were doing a kind of expressionistic music theater; and members of the noise-oriented Los Angeles Free Music Society (LAFMS) were forming various splinter Art Rock bands... Each separate scene was so tiny, and so undefined as of yet, that they invited border confusion.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> The Poetics was actually Kelley’s third band, following the short-lived Polka Dot and the Spots, which Kelley describes as “extremely crude and moronic.” (Kelley, “The Poetics”).

<sup>156</sup> Kelley, “The Poetics.” For an example of Krieger’s use of the “orgatron,” see the song “Mr. Orgatron,” on *The Poetics: Remixes of Recordings from 1977 to 1983* (Los Angeles: Compound Annex, 1996).

<sup>157</sup> Mike Kelley, “Introduction to an essay which is in the form of Liner Notes for a CD Reissue Box Set” (<http://www.mikekelley.com/poeticintro.html>).

<sup>158</sup> Kelley, “The Poetics.”

However, unlike McCarthy, who had been in L.A. since 1970, Kelley arrived at tail end of this art-music interbreeding. For him, the trend was short-lived, quickly overtaken by the burgeoning punk movement.

As Kelley sees it, the arrival of punk not only solidified the previously porous borders between L.A. art and music, but led to his own abandonment of music as the primary focus of his career. Punk, he recalls, hit the city “like a disease—a British germ that infected everyone overnight.”<sup>159</sup> A once permissive community thus grew increasingly hostile towards anything that did not conform to the punk aesthetic. Echoing Pettibon’s characterization of the L.A. scene, Kelley explains that “music there was judged on length of song and hair: both had to be extremely short.” At a time when rock-and-roll seemed to have exhausted its potency, punk seemed more of a continuity than a break. “The new Punk phenomena,” he recalls, “didn’t provide much of an alternative as far as I was concerned.”<sup>160</sup> Indeed, it appeared to be just another recycling of sixties-era rock rebelliousness, though in inverted form.<sup>161</sup> Soured by its ascendancy, Kelley “abandoned the band format at that time to pursue solo performance work.”<sup>162</sup> Arguably, his turn toward visual art as a primary focus was a negative response to the rise of punk in the late-seventies.

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<sup>159</sup> Kelley, “To the Throne of Chaos.”

<sup>160</sup> Kelley, “The Poetics.”

<sup>161</sup> “Punk’s reactionary anthems shouting ‘Kill the Hippies!’” Kelley remarks, were “simply adolescent Oedipal backlash.” “If punks had really hated hippies,” he concludes, “they should have kept their mouths shut” (Mike Kelley, “Death and Transfiguration” (1992), reprinted in *Foul Perfection*, 136).

<sup>162</sup> Liner Notes to Destroy All Monsters box set, *Destroy All Monsters*, n.p.

However, as Kelley points out, the catalyst for this shift was not just punk in general, but Southern California's specific brand of punk—the same Hardcore scene that Pettibon repeatedly lampoons. The Poetics, Kelley explains, “never quite fit into the California Punk scene...which quickly went in the direction of Hardcore, and we were left out on the periphery.”<sup>163</sup> To Kelley, Hardcore—which he refers to as “second-string American Punk”—was an outgrowth not of “proto-punk” groups such as the Stooges, the New York Dolls and the Ramones, but of market-driven spectacle-bands epitomized by MacLaren's Sex Pistols.<sup>164</sup> It was more about fashion than subversive politics—a realization that underlies Kelley's ambivalence toward rock-and-roll factions past, present and future. The relationship of the Poetics to punk is thus analogous to that of Destroy All Monsters to the sixties counterculture. Both bands substituted perversity and puerilism for polemics—a musical strategy that parallels Kelley's approach to visual art.

These two tactics dovetailed in a performance called *Pansy Metal/Clovered Hoof* (1989) (fig. 42), done in collaboration with Anita Pace Dance Company in Los Angeles. The piece was conceived as a kind of fashion show, in which dancers modeled a series of silk banners designed by Kelley. Dressed only in underwear and these banners,

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<sup>163</sup> Kelley, “The Poetics.”

<sup>164</sup> As Kelley points out, “The American bands that were influential in the development of British Punk: the Stooges, the New York Dolls and the Ramones, were indeed minor American bands in their own times, without any of the celebration and critical response that the Sex Pistols garnered. And second-string American Punk, especially California Hardcore, was obviously more of an outgrowth of the media-conscious and fashionable Sex Pistols than Midwestern and East Coast garage rock of the late 60s and early 70s” (Kelley, “The Poetics”).

participants paraded down runway ramps with bells attached to their ankles, moving to music by the band Motörhead.<sup>165</sup>

This performance, and the banners it featured, commented not on punk or Hardcore, but on heavy metal—a subject implicitly targeted by *Destroy All Monsters*, but here explicitly satirized. Like punk and Hardcore, heavy metal relies on aggressive form and content as ciphers of antisocial thinking. Characterized by high volume, intricate guitar work, booming drumming, a heavy bass line and screaming vocals, coupled with dark subject matter—destruction, evil, insanity, disasters, mayhem, carnage, death, chaos, suicide<sup>166</sup>—heavy metal casts itself as an open rejection of social norms, morality and proper behavior.

One banner, *Skull* (fig. 43), targets Motörhead itself, presenting a smiling self-portrait-as-devil above Kelley's name, written in a gothic-style script with umlauts over all the Es. As seen on a number of the band's album covers—their 1979 release, *Overkill* (fig. 44), for example—Motörhead's mascot is a grinning demon, and the band's logo features a similar gothic font with a superfluous umlaut over the second O.<sup>167</sup> A heavy metal pioneer and a key progenitor of its gloomy mystique, Motörhead helped establish such sinister imagery as an essential accessory to the music.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> For a description of this performance, see the Anita Pace Dance Company's website: <http://www.pacedance.com/APCHOR2.htm>.

<sup>166</sup> Weinstein, 27-43.

<sup>167</sup> Motörhead, *Overkill* (Bronze Records, 1979).

<sup>168</sup> For information on Motörhead, see *Illustrated Collector's Guide to Motörhead*, by Alan Burrige and Mick Stevenson (Burlington, Ontario: Collector's Guide Publishing, 1995).

Indeed, heavy metal's visual style is not only standardized, but strictly enforced by its subculture. As Deena Weinstein explains, logos such as Motörhead's iconic demon are of primary importance to the maintenance of this subculture.<sup>169</sup> "What is depicted," she points out, "must be somewhat ominous, threatening, and unsettling, suggesting chaos and bordering on the grotesque." Also essential are stylized typographies, whose "minimum requirements...are angularity and thickness," often taking the form of "Teutonic" lettering.<sup>170</sup> The objective was an aesthetics of dystopia that could supplement the aggressive, antisocial themes conveyed by the music and lyrics. The Motörhead logo is paradigmatic—a model for more mainstream metal bands, such as Mötley Crüe (note the umlauts), who later adopted what was by then a fully entrenched heavy metal symbology.<sup>171</sup>

Thus, while specifically referencing the band whose music served as the soundtrack to *Pansy Metal/Clovered Hoof*, Kelley's banner also targets the general visual style of the genre—the codes that communicate its air of aggressiveness and despair. Adopting this motif, he attempted his own personal logo, but to a decidedly lamer effect. Produced with his trademark clumsiness, the fiend in *Skull* is a dopey devil—more dimwitted than diabolical—while the sinister connotation of the gothic lettering (actually just another romanticization of the medieval, though in inverted form) is sapped by

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<sup>169</sup> As Weinstein points out, "heavy metal bands, more than other types of rock groups, use logos. These function in the same way as do the logos of multinational corporations, to provide fast identification and to convey a significant image" (Weinstein, 27).

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 27-29.

<sup>171</sup> For information on Mötley Crüe, see *Mötley Crüe: Lewd, Crude & Rude*, by Sylvie Simmons (New York: Penguin, 1995).

Kelley's feebler, all-lowercase rendering. That the work is not only handcrafted, but silk—a material particularly incongruous with its satanic subject matter—further undermines its infernal imagery. Kelley thus “feminizes” a fervently male-oriented subculture.<sup>172</sup> The banner is indeed more “pansy” than heavy.

The second half of the performance's title, “clovered hoof”—a play on the Devil's legendary cloven hoof—also alludes to heavy metal's Mephistophelean content. However, the shamrocks that adorn a number of the banners constitute a more personal reference, to Kelley's own Irish Catholic upbringing, a connotation reinforced by the series' dominant Irish-flag-palette of green, orange and white. This layering of seemingly disparate allusions—to heavy metal on one hand and to Kelley's heritage on the other—characterizes *Emerald Eye Hole* (fig. 45), for example, a banner consisting of a half-green, half-orange skull surrounded by chains and clovers. Similarly, *The Orange and Green* (fig. 46) includes Kelley's long-haired self-portrait in the same tricolor tones. Here, the artist depicts himself in a trance-like state, mouth hung open and eyes rolling back into his head. Yet, this doped-up metalhead (or is he a tripping hippie?) is depicted in a standard religious icon format, as a kind of stoner-saint surrounded by halo-like bands of orange and green.

Kelley's unholy mix of national emblems, death imagery, religious iconography, Satanism and heavy metal disrupts any coherent meaning, both within each banner and across the series as a whole. However, the seemingly incongruous mix of Irish Catholicism with popular music—and specifically with the self-serious, doom-and-gloom

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<sup>172</sup> For a discussion of the gender issues of heavy metal, see Weinstein, 102-05.

posturing of heavy metal—is not arbitrary here. As Weinstein points out, Christian symbols are especially prominent in the heavy metal style:

The Christian signifiers in which the metal subculture is steeped may not function in the same way that they do in the discourses of mainline churches, but they are not just arbitrary. A significant part of metal’s mythology revolves around the more apocalyptic strain of Christianity, especially the Book of Revelations.<sup>173</sup>

Essentially, heavy metal teases out from Christian dogma its dismal prophecies and symbols of darkness. Kelley, in turn, reapplies this same strategy to the metal style itself. Highlighting two supposedly contradictory entities—rock and religion—he clumsily recombines their signifiers into a caricature that disrupts the dark and humorless aura fundamental to the genre’s identity. This indeed had particular significance for Kelley, who, in accordance with his Catholic upbringing, spent a good part of his youth “in mass sniffing incense and listening to death-lyrics accompanied by organ music.”<sup>174</sup>

Meanwhile, the fashion-show format of *Pansy Metal/Clover Hoof* further satirized heavy metal’s rebellious image, presenting it as a façade, as just another manifestation of rock-and-roll style. As the models progressed down the runway, their motions resembled ritual dancing, striptease and headbanging—the trademark heavy metal dance.<sup>175</sup> The work thus portrayed all three as the products of preset gesticulations, as distinct bodily languages invested with precise meaning. The metal fan’s fierce, rhythmic nodding was

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<sup>173</sup> Weinstein, 128-29.

<sup>174</sup> Kelley, “The Poetics.”

<sup>175</sup> As Weinstein explains, headbanging “involves a downward thrust of the head with a gentler up thrust. The move is distinctive enough to metal to serve, by metonym, as a designation of the metal audience: ‘headbangers’” (Weinstein, 130-31).

thus presented as a codified sign—not the impulsive expression of raw rage that fans claim it to be, but a routine as scripted as the ceremonial ritual or erotic stage show.

Similarly, the performance suggested that the belligerent heavy metal persona is—like the hippie and the punk—a construct, the product of a standard set of signs. As Weinstein explains, “heavy metal is inhospitable, if not hostile, to performers whose looks do not conform to its codes of appearance.” Actually, she concludes, “of all the personae of popular music...the heavy metal persona is most tied to appearance.”<sup>176</sup>

Draped in “evil” imagery, Kelley’s beardless, long-haired models excessively conformed to this standard. Yet, the heavy metal image, intended as an authentic revolt against the superficiality of previous rock-costumes, is irreconcilable with the work’s runway context. Kelley’s heavy metal fashion show openly mocked the pretentiousness of a subculture that sees itself not only as adamantly anti-fashion, but wholly removed from social convention.

This had particular resonance at the end of the 1980s—a decade that witnessed the full crystallization of the heavy metal style, made especially important as television, and specifically MTV, became the primary medium for music distribution. It was also during this time that Los Angeles became a center of heavy metal culture. Here, an even more intense and aggressive musical style, called “thrash” or “speed” metal, developed. Described by Weinstein as the genre’s “fundamentalist strain,” its rise established L.A. as “the major metal Mecca in the United States.”<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 31-76.

Thus infiltrating the mainstream, heavy metal became a lightening rod for critics and commentators who took its rebellious image at face value. Indeed, it often seemed that metal was even more culturally incendiary than punk or any of its derivatives had ever been. In 1985, for example, the United States Senate held hearings on the degenerative state of popular music, a response to the lobbying efforts of Tipper Gore's Parent's Music Resource Center (PMRC).<sup>178</sup> Heavy metal was thus singled out for encouraging degeneracy, sexual perversion, violence, suicide and Satanism—a conclusion based largely on mis-readings of lyrics, supported by visual “evidence” in the form of album covers depicting “evil” imagery.<sup>179</sup> As was the case with the government's contemporaneous pornography investigation, this reaction was supported by both the religious Right and the progressive, politically-correct Left.

For Weinstein, the PMRC hearings evinced heavy metal's efficacy at transgressing social norms, confirming society's wildest fears about the subculture on the one hand, while reinforcing the “proud pariah status” of its fans and practitioners on the other.<sup>180</sup> As Kelley presents it, however, heavy metal is yet another hollow rehashing of rock rebelliousness. Indeed, though she believes it is truly deviant, Weinstein acknowledges that “heavy metal carried forward the attitudes, values and practices that characterized the Woodstock generation.” In fact, she claims, “metal continues with

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<sup>178</sup> Called “Record Labeling, Senate Hearing 99-259,” these hearings were held in September, 1985.

<sup>179</sup> For an overview of these hearings, see Weinstein, 249-63.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.

more purity than other forms of youth music the original ethos of rock and roll.”<sup>181</sup> For Kelley, this makes it just another fad, one which simply inverted the original countercultural codes, substituting despair for hope, evil for love, black for earth tones and rainbow colors, leather for natural fibers.

As with rock and punk, such a realization forestalls the entire heavy metal debate, since both fans and detractors see the music and its styles as truly subversive—as an antisocial, corruptive force. As Weinstein points out, heavy metal visuals are essentially based on a “play with symbols that some segments of the society [holds] sacred.”<sup>182</sup> Kelley turns this strategy in on itself, caricaturing metal’s seditious self-image by portraying it as mere fashion. The performance thus dismantles myths on both sides, undermining the genre’s own claims to defiance along with the reactionary view of it as immoral and dangerous. The argument over its cultural value therefore becomes moot. What was implicit in DAM’s “Iron Man” farce a decade and a half earlier was therefore rendered more explicit by Kelley’s *Pansy Metal* event. Both treated heavy metal’s determined reversal of sixties “peace and love” as empty rhetoric and inane spectacle.

In light of this, the obviously cheap horror effects in the work of Gobbler and Extended Organ—like those of Destroy All Monsters—can also be seen as parodies of metal’s ominous sound and masquerade. The absurd antics of these bands and their disorienting, juvenile songs operate against such self-aggrandizement, just as it works against punk’s likeminded attempt to re-launch a rock rebellion. Pettibon’s anti-Hardcore drawings could just as well apply here. In the end, Kelley, Pettibon and McCarthy each

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<sup>181</sup> Ibid., 18, 248.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid., 238.

preempt the possibility of a truly subversive musical subculture—whether of the sixties, seventies or beyond, whether progenitor or so-called corrective. Their music-related work characterizes a half-century of hotly contested rock-and-roll debates as rhetorical distraction and misdirected banter. It also underscores an essential precept of these artist's oeuvres in general. Recognizing that the counterculture style of social and political critique is not only antiquated, but debilitating, these artists adopt a strategy steeped in perversion, forced contradiction, insincerity and dark humor. Though they apply it to a range of non-music subjects—as will be discussed in subsequent chapters—this strategy is largely an extension of the methods employed by the Stooges, the Mothers of Invention and their ilk, followed by Destroy All Monsters and the bands associated with the Los Angeles Free Music Society. Not just a prominent target of their critiques, music has served as a precedent and crucial source of Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon's anti-idealist approach overall.

## CHAPTER TWO

### SEXUAL CONVOLUTION

In a drawing from *Tripping Corpse Four* (1984) (fig. 47), a euphoric and naked flower child boogies to the beat, her swooning body painted with flowers, hearts and the phrase “Turn Me On.” “MOTHER WOULD SIMPLY DIE,” she boasts, “SIMPLY DIE!” Because of the knife in her hand, however, it is not clear at what this anticipated parental disapproval would be directed. Is it her uninhibited sexuality—her proud nakedness—or her participation in some truly disturbing act of off-screen carnage? Either way, the work’s mix of ecstasy, violence and counterculture makes it another Pettibon satire of sixties-era radicalism. Yet, the artist includes an additional reference: scrawled in blood on the wall behind her is “SHANG-A-LANG,” the title of a 1974 pop song by the Bay City Rollers, a Scottish band known for kitschy teenybopper tunes.<sup>1</sup> That this sugary song is linked to erotic rapture and wanton butchery renders the scene, and its hippie latecomer, that much more absurd. What had been contradictory in the sixties was patently ridiculous—if not dangerous—in the seventies. Pettibon again caricatures the perpetuation of a bankrupt notion of rock rebelliousness, this time by affixing it to an openly corporate and vacuous style of music. With its brazen nudity and

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<sup>1</sup> “Shang-A-Lang” appears on the Bay City Rollers’ album *Rollin’* (Bell Records, 1974).

popular slogan of arousal, however, this work also implicates another equally problematic counterculture tenet: the belief in sexual liberation as an effective form of dissent, as a path toward social and political revolution.

That Pettibon sets his drawing in the mid-1970s is apropos, for by then sex, like rock-and-roll, had been commercialized and mainstreamed. While the music industry was cashing in on the counterculture's legacy, sexual liberation was similarly being packaged and marketed for mass consumption. Countless sex-advice books—*The Sensuous Woman* (1969), *The Sensuous Man* (1970), *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex...But Were Afraid to Ask* (1970), *The Joy of Sex* (1972) and its sequel, *More Joy* (1973)—arrived to help Americans overcome their inhibitions, ostensibly ushering them into the age of free love. Meanwhile, William Masters and Virginia Johnson's pseudo-scientific study, *Human Sexual Inadequacy* (1970), emerged as a cultural phenomenon, offering supposed solutions to a range of sexual problems, including impotence and "inorgasmia."<sup>2</sup> These guidebooks coincided with a deluge of sexually graphic entertainment: novels such as Xaviera Hollander's *The Happy Hooker* (1972), Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* (1973), and Nancy Friday's *My Secret Garden* (1973); movies such as *I am Curious (Yellow)* (1967), *Vixen* (1969), *Last Tango in Paris* (1972), *Deep Throat* (1972), *Beyond the Green Door* (1973), and *The Devil and Mrs. Jones* (1973); and musicals such as *Hair* (1968) and *Oh! Calcutta!* (1969).

Despite their explicitness, however, these products remained within distinct parameters of the normal and acceptable. *Oh! Calcutta!*, for instance, was a series of staged vignettes by well-known writers commissioned to compose something erotic. Its

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<sup>2</sup> The book sold 300,000 copies in the first two months of its publication (Allyn, 166).

abundance of nudity made audiences feel naughty, yet the show adhered to rather strict sexual standards. (The portrayal of male homosexuality was explicitly prohibited by its producers.) Similarly, Masters and Johnson exclusively promoted heterosexuality and marriage, while Johnson herself had accused feminists of making men feel inadequate and therefore causing sexual dysfunction. David Reuben's *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex*—hailed as a prophecy of sexual liberation by both its readers and the medical profession—likewise claims that “there is no substitute for heterosexual sex—penis and vagina.” *The Joy of Sex* is also essentially a marriage manual. Alongside helpful domestic tips like how to get semen out of clothing, the book's illustrated couple demonstrate various erotic activities and positions—the woman depicted with underarm hair, the man with an uncircumcised penis and beard. Just a bit more liberated and “natural” than the book's intended audience, these figures were designed specifically to appeal to middle-class America. Described by its author Alex Comfort as “the first explicitly sexual book for the coffee table,” *The Joy Sex* became less a catalyst for rebellion than a token of bourgeois sophistication.<sup>3</sup>

Immensely popular, these books, shows and movies thus recast heterosexual, patriarchal sex as risqué, allowing suburban Americans to participate in the sexual revolution. Meanwhile, a series of Supreme Court rulings against censorship fueled this industry of commercialized sexuality.<sup>4</sup> As historian Jeffery Escoffier explains,

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<sup>3</sup> Allyn, 121-229.

<sup>4</sup> The culmination of the Court's shift against censorship was a 1966 ruling that virtually ended the censorship of literary obscenity by absolving *Fanny Hill*, the oldest pornographic book in English.

despite the political and cultural importance of [these] First Amendment battles, the legal victories often translated into phenomenal economic success for the publishers, filmmakers and distributors of sexually explicit materials. Moreover, these materials were aimed at male audiences, and thus sought to satisfy many of the traditional male sexual fantasies. They tended to reinforce standardized conceptions of sexual attractiveness.<sup>5</sup>

Whereas the sexual revolution was supposedly based on something abundant and almost always free of charge, by the mid-seventies it was clear that its primary achievements were commercial.<sup>6</sup>

This robust sex industry was chiefly an outgrowth of the 1960s counterculture, which viewed repression as a prime obstacle to social, cultural and political transformation. Indeed, liberation from repression was arguably its most essential objective.<sup>7</sup> Yet, the movement's notion of transgressive sexuality was hardly new at the time. The term "sexual revolution" was coined in the 1920s by Wilhelm Reich, an Austrian psychoanalyst who believed that erotic freedom would lead to an overhaul of

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<sup>5</sup> Jeffrey Escoffier, Introduction to *Sexual Revolution*, ed. Jeffrey Escoffier (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2003). xxiv-v.

<sup>6</sup> *Playboy* magazine—which began in 1953 with a press run of 70,000, but by 1967 had a circulation of four million readers—was probably the most famous (or infamous) product of this phenomenon. *Playboy's* self-proclaimed ideal was good, clean sexuality—what was described by *Time* magazine in the late sixties as the "Nude Next Door" ("Think Clean," *Time*, in *Sexual Revolution*, 374). Publisher Hugh Hefner himself saw the magazine as participating in the battle against repression, claiming that "you get healthy sex not by ignoring it but by emphasizing it" (quoted in "Think Clean," 377). Yet, he simultaneously recognized that such cultural entities are not at odds with the establishment, but actually help reinforce it. Thus, Hefner celebrated *Playboy* as "a publication that helps motivate a part of society to work harder, to accomplish more, to earn more in order to enjoy more of the material benefits described—to that extent, the publication is contributing to the economic growth of the nation" (quoted in "Think Clean," 379).

<sup>7</sup> This is confirmed by Roszak in *The Making of a Counter Culture* (1969) (Roszak, 95-6).

Western society. In America, however, the term first surfaced as a pejorative, as in Harvard sociologist Pitrim Sorokin's *The American Sex Revolution* (1954), in which the author lamented the apparent eroticization of mass culture, understood as an unambiguous sign of moral decay. Claiming that "we are completely surrounded by the rising tide of sex, which is flooding every compartment of our culture, every section of our social life," Sorokin warned that "unless we develop an inner immunity against these libidinal forces, we are bound to be conquered by the continuous presence of a gigantic array of omni-present sex stimuli."<sup>8</sup>

Though opposite in intention, this line of thought set the stage for the promotion of sexuality by those who sought to subvert traditional values, rather than protect them. Instead of fearing its degenerative effects, activists began to embrace the idea of sexual revolution as a catalyst for positive change. In 1965, Beat journalist Lawrence Lipton published *The Erotic Revolution*, in which he argued for a "new morality" that embraced all forms of sexuality. Lipton promoted the idea that sexual freedom would lead to other forms of liberation, claiming that "of all the revolutions sweeping the world today, political, economic, social, scientific and moral, the [sexual revolution] may prove to be the most far-reaching, the most deep-going of all."<sup>9</sup>

By the end of the 1960s, "sexual revolution" had thus come to designate a wide range of phenomena—including the impact of the birth control pill, the repudiation of literary censorship by the Supreme Court, the prevalence of urban sex clubs, and the popular acceptance of sexuality in film and on stage—each celebrated as a landmark on

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<sup>8</sup> Pitrim Sorokin, *The American Sex Revolution* (Boston: F. Porter Sargent, 1956), 54.

<sup>9</sup> Lawrence Lipton, *The Erotic Revolution* (1965), reprinted in *Sexual Revolution*, 20.

the road to complete liberation.<sup>10</sup> To the counterculture generation, this liberation was something more than just an increase in tolerance; it was an initial step in the much broader transformation of social and cultural norms, regulations and institutions. Sexual openness was thus politicized—that is, promoted as an agent of sweeping political change.

What was galvanizing in theory, however, was deeply flawed in practice. As with the industry it would soon spark, the conception of free love put forth by its proponents was for the most part soundly traditional. This included an almost exclusive prioritization of patriarchal standards of sexuality—standards which reinforced, rather than resisted, conventional gender roles as well as distinctions between the normal and the deviant. A brochure distributed by the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), for example, claimed that “the system is like a woman; you’ve got to fuck it to make it change.” This hyper-masculine, largely misogynist mentality also produced a number of slogans that accompanied the preeminent “Make Love Not War,” including “Free Land, Free Dope, Free Women” and “Peace, Pussy, Pot.” Meanwhile, monogamy remained a primary precept. Timothy Leary, one of the leading proponents of radical change in the sixties, was thus critical of promiscuity, encouraging young people to stick with a single partner.<sup>11</sup> J.L. Simmons and Barry Winograd’s *It’s Happening: Portrait of the Youth Scene Today* (1966) is similarly revealing. Noting changes in sexual morality among the sixties generation, they point out that:

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<sup>10</sup> Allyn, 4-5.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 100-03.

for those with “liberalized” sexual codes, it is positively consistent for a woman to admit forthrightly that she really does enjoy sex and for a man to fall in love and marry somebody who’s been to bed with a dozen other men. Some males go further, preferring girls who’ve had experience with others, shying away from virginity as a possible badge of coldness.<sup>12</sup>

Simmons and Winograd view such developments as liberating for both men and women.

Yet, as this passage confirms, sexual freedom was defined in terms of monogamous relationships, love and marriage, and resolute heterosexuality. This last point was hammered home by Norman Mailer, who championed the sexual revolution but infamously epitomized its homophobic bent. In *Cannibals and Christians* (1966), for example, Mailer suggested that the reason for an apparent rise in homosexuality “might have to do with a general loss of faith in the country, faith in the meaning of one’s work, faith in the notion of oneself as a man.”<sup>13</sup>

Despite these biases—and the practical limitations they represented for a movement that preached the abrogation of traditional norms and conventions—the sexual revolution was hindered by an even more profound flaw. Founded upon a conception of human sexuality as a continuous struggle between innate urges and the cultural order that restrains them, the movement was essentially envisioned as a battle against repression, with widespread political change linked to the triumph over it. In fact, this opposition between repression and desire was fundamental to the views of conservatives as well as progressives. Each saw repression as the cornerstone of modern civilization; they simply had differing opinion of that civilization. Those on the side of a “sexual revolution” saw

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<sup>12</sup> J.L. Simmons and Barry Winograd, *It's Happening: Portrait of the Youth Scene Today* (Santa Barbara: Marc-Laird, 1966), 109-10.

<sup>13</sup> Norman Mailer, *Cannibals and Christians* (New York: Dial, 1966), 200-201.

repression as not only an impediment to freedom, but an instrument of institutional control. The full emancipation of desire would transform the current cultural and political order and engender a more peaceful, loving society. Opponents of this thinking also saw unbridled sexuality as a threat to the status quo, but unlike their counterparts, they strove to preserve traditional values rather than eradicate them.

Both views are rooted in the earliest psychoanalytical theories of Sigmund Freud, who similarly saw repression as the lynchpin of society, essential to keeping socially destructive instincts in check.<sup>14</sup> If effectively implemented, a balanced management of sexuality would result in a productive society, one which encouraged a broad range of normative behavior while inhibiting perverse inclinations.<sup>15</sup> The inability to properly control sexual instincts, on the other hand, would lead to a degeneration into abnormalities—into neuroses or pathologies, both sexual and otherwise—which threaten social stability. At the root of this conception of socialized psychology was a basic opposition between nature and culture, a continual contest between raw, antisocial sexual desires and society's need to control them. According to Freud, these are the two poles around which civilization is constructed, its success ensured only through the protection of each side from undue domination by its opposing force.

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<sup>14</sup> In an early essay, “‘Civilized’ Sexual Morality and Modern Nervousness” (1908), Freud articulated his claim that sexual repression is the basis of successful culture. “Civilization,” he claimed, “is...founded on the suppression of instincts... The energies available for ‘cultural’ development are won...through suppression of the so-called perverse elements of sexual excitement.” This suppression of perverse desires is most successfully achieved, according to Freud, through “sublimation,” defined as the “ability to exchange the originally sexual aim for another which is no longer sexual but is psychically related” (Freud, “‘Civilized’ Sexual Morality and Modern Nervousness,” *Sexual Revolution*, 562-63).

<sup>15</sup> (Ibid., 562).

Reich, a student of Freud who immigrated to the United States in 1939, was one of the first to challenge this hypothesis. With his landmark treatise, published in English as *The Sexual Revolution: Toward a Self-Governing Character Structure* (1945), Reich rejected Freud's notion that the subjugation of sexuality is indispensable for cultural development. Rather than understanding repression as the necessary response to deviant desires, Reich reversed Freud's psychosocial formula; he conceived of aberrant sexuality as the result, rather than the cause, of the forces that seek to contain it. The "antisocial impulses"—which, for Freud, justified repression—were, according to Reich, themselves derived "from the non-gratification of...natural demands." The unnatural restrictions placed on children's impulses, he argued, ultimately cause the neuroses and pathologies Freud warned against, not vice versa. Thus, "moral regulation of instinctual life creates exactly what it pretends to master."<sup>16</sup>

In response to this paradox, he proposed the complete elimination of social restrictions on sexuality, which he claimed would result in the automatic abolition of perverse instincts. "Social evolution" would come from individuals embracing their sexuality, since "genital gratification"—instead of repression—was "the decisive sex-economic factor in the prevention of neuroses and establishment of social achievement."<sup>17</sup> Once human sexuality was allowed to fully express itself, Reich contended, a utopian society based entirely on "self-regulation" would emerge, one with

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<sup>16</sup> Reich, *The Sexual Revolution*, reprinted in *Sexual Revolution*, 578-87. The book was originally published in German as *Der Sexuelle Kampf der Jugend (The Sexual Struggle of Youth)* (Berlin: Verlag für Sexualpolitik, 1932); published in English as *The Sexual Revolution: Toward a Self-Governing Character Structure* (New York: Orgone Institute Press, 1945).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 586-87.

no need for moral guidelines because there would be no antisocial impulses with which to contend.<sup>18</sup> This inversion of Freud's position helped lay the theoretical groundwork for the 1960s notion of social change through sexual liberation.<sup>19</sup>

Yet it is also Reich's expansion of Freud's nature-culture polarity that made *The Sexual Revolution* useful for the American movement that borrowed its name. He not only saw an inherent opposition between Western cultural order and the "natural biological needs" repressed by it, but explained this opposition in economic and political terms. The current system, he argued,

developed, in primitive society, when a certain upper class with economic superiority began to attain power; for economic reasons, this class had an interest in suppressing the natural needs, though they, in themselves, *in no way* disturbed sociality. Compulsive moral regulation gained a reason for its existence the moment when that which it produced *actively* began to endanger social life.

Reich therefore concluded that the eradication of sexual repression would not only transform social behavior, engendering a "complete harmony between nature and culture,"<sup>20</sup> but have profound political repercussions as well. He effectively opened the door for the use of sex as a revolutionary tool.

This politicization of sexuality was echoed by a number of subsequent theorists, most notably Herbert Marcuse in *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (1955) and Norman O. Brown in *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical*

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<sup>18</sup> This society would encourage, for example, love between adolescents and infantile masturbation and "deal severely with any adult who would prevent the child from developing its natural sexuality" (Ibid., 590).

<sup>19</sup> As Gay Talese has noted, Reich's death in 1957 was largely ignored, but, by the mid-1960s, the audience for his books exploded [Gay Talese, *Thy Neighbors Wife* (1980), reprinted in *Sexual Revolution*, 193-4).

<sup>20</sup> Reich, 589-91.

*Meaning of History* (1959) and *Love's Body* (1966).<sup>21</sup> Both writers had profound effects on contemporary thinking. Like Reich, Marcuse hypothesized a “non-repressive civilization,” one in which humanity would be liberated from the restrictions imposed by culture. Also disputing Freud, he argued that the abolition of sexual repression would lead not to the end of civilization but to “higher forms of civilized freedom.” As a result, humanity would return to an Edenic state, in which man would be free to “order his life in accordance with his fully developed knowledge, so that he would ask again what is good and what is evil.”<sup>22</sup> Marcuse, however, was careful not to call for a total emancipation, but for a repeal of only “surplus repression”—everything except the basic limits on instant gratification, which would be necessary even in a fully liberated society.<sup>23</sup>

Where Marcuse hedged his prophesy, Brown expounded the liberating powers of sexual freedom with a near-religious fervor. Citing Eastern mysticism and plethora of romantic thinkers, he similarly theorized a return to the state of psychic unity that predated the advent of repression. Brown urged individuals to choose the “life instinct” over the “death instinct,” claiming that, more than any other, “the question confronting mankind is the abolition of repression—in traditional Christian language, the resurrection

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<sup>21</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974); Norman O. Brown, *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan U. Press, 1985); Norman O. Brown, *Love's Body* (Berkeley, CA: U. of California Press, 1966).

<sup>22</sup> Marcuse, 198-200.

<sup>23</sup> For a critique of this position, see Roszak, 112-13.

of the body.” This abolition would, he argued, eradicate “the unnatural concentrations of libido on certain bodily organs,” and as a result:

The human body would become polymorphously perverse, delighting in that full life of all the body which it now fears. The consciousness strong enough to endure full life would be no longer Apollonian but Dionysian—consciousness which does not observe the limit, but overflows; consciousness which *does not negate any more*.<sup>24</sup>

According to Brown, this new unshackled consciousness would transcend the current order of things, ultimately generating a new utopian politics to which neither capitalism nor socialism could sufficiently respond.<sup>25</sup>

If Reich was the most influential theorist of sexuality for the counterculture generation, Marcuse and Brown were second only to him.<sup>26</sup> In *Make Love, Not War: The Sexual Revolution, An Unfettered History* (2000), David Allyn notes the immense popularity of their writings among students of the 1960s and 70s.<sup>27</sup> Theodore Roszak acknowledged this at the time. In *The Making of a Counter Culture* (1969), Roszak referred to Marcuse and Brown as “major social theorists among the disaffiliated young of Western Europe and America” and characterized the dissemination of their writings as “one of the defining features of the counter culture.” While noting various points of contention between the two thinkers, he made clear the centrality of repression, and its abolition, to their positions. Both, he explained, recognized that contemporary problems

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<sup>24</sup> Brown, *Life Against Death*, 307-08.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 317-18.

<sup>26</sup> Jefferey Escoffier recently noted that “throughout the sixties...there was no more influential theorist of sexuality than Reich” (Escoffier, xvii).

<sup>27</sup> Allyn, 200.

are largely psychological, not sociological—that “alienation results from deep and secret acts of repression that will not yield to a mere reshuffling of our society’s institutional structures.”<sup>28</sup> More than any others, it was Marcuse and Brown who popularized the notion of politicized sexuality. Together with Reich’s text, their writings constituted the theoretical cornerstone of the sexual revolution.

Essentially, these post-Freudian theorists saw themselves as shifting the focus of political thought from symptoms to psychological causes. They attempted to dig deeper, to probe the human psyche for the roots of social problems and thus discover ways to solve them. Sexuality—understood as a primary determining factor of existence—logically became central to this investigation. They built upon Freud’s findings, but also sought to fundamentally revise them, to reconfigure them into a radical politics based on sexual liberation. Each therefore launched an assault against Freud’s apologia of repression as well as a reversal of traditional Marxist social criticism; they saw human consciousness as determining, rather than determined by, its social situation.<sup>29</sup>

In doing so, however, they, like Freud, relied on problematic assumptions about that consciousness, about the instincts and desires that constitute it. By opposing sexuality to the forces of social and political order, they supposed it to be biologically innate—wholly a product of nature rather than nurture. Roszak praised Marcuse for realizing that Freud “mistook a sociological fact for an unbudgeable biological fact,” which facilitated Freud’s rationalization of repression.<sup>30</sup> Arguably, though, Marcuse,

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<sup>28</sup> Roszak, 84-96.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

Brown and Reich repeated the same error with regard to the “natural” sexual impulses they promoted to counteract that repression. Underlying the terms and conditions of their arguments remained Freud’s fixed nature-culture opposition. The accent had just been shifted.

Nonetheless, the radical flavor of these mid-century treatises appealed to a sixties generation seeking political change. Regardless of how many of its individual proponents actually read the texts, the American sexual revolution—a movement lacking in cohesion or definitive objective, but on the whole united against repression—was largely based on this same nature-culture polarity. From feminist Andrea Dworkin’s endorsement of cunnilingus and fellatio as fundamentally political acts<sup>31</sup> to the Weathermen’s attempt to “smash monogamy” as a rebellion against bourgeois hegemony<sup>32</sup> to the defiant displays of nudity at Woodstock, sexual desires were presented as part of an essential human nature, artificially fettered by a cultural order badly in need of transformation. Contemporaneous political events and conditions were therefore bound to this system of repressed human nature. As an antidote, sexual liberation was posited as an means of insurgence against forces of domination.

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<sup>31</sup> As Dworkin states: “Given the selective enforcement of the laws, the shame that attaches to forbidden acts, and the fact that the acts of oral lovemaking represented in words or in pictures are generally deemed obscene, sucking must be seen in and of itself as an act of political significance” (Andrea Dworkin, *Woman Hating* [New York: Dutton, 1974], 79-80).

<sup>32</sup> As David Allyn points out, “members of the [Weathermen] movement were instructed to abandon monogamous relationships and told to have sex with as many partners as possible” as a path to social and political revolution (Allyn, 219). The Weathermen, a spin-off of Students for a Democratic Society, was formed in 1968 as a more radical—and violent—alternative to the pacifism of the SDS and other New Left organizations.

Catchphrases such as “Turn Me On” and “Make Love Not War” embodied this logic. As the counterculture motto *par excellence*, the latter especially typified the presumed schism between sexuality and cultural convention. “Make Love Not War” represents the reduction of the contemporaneous sociopolitical situation to a basic either-or opposition: either you supported love (defined as open and free sexuality) or war (namely, the U.S. military campaign in Vietnam). Eschewing the nuances of both sides, the politics of human behavior had been reduced to mere slogans.

Pettibon’s acerbic confluences of sex, counterculture and indiscriminate violence explode such slogans, envisioning a world of liberated desire that is hardly desirable. Yet, these works are not simply warnings against too much freedom. Their satiric humor subverts the debate itself, mocking the essential notion of politically and culturally incendiary sex. The aforementioned drawing from *Tripping Corpse Four* (1984) thus undermines both the movement toward sexual freedom and the conservative response to that movement—two sides of an argument that dovetail as much as they diverge. It parodies the youthful idealization of sexuality *and* the overblown claims of adult reactionaries, like the girl’s mother, that such liberation would lead to the downfall of civilization—to the very violence implied here.

A number of works by Kelley and McCarthy present similarly double-edged critiques. Like Pettibon, they shift attention from the conflict between restriction and liberation to more fundamental issues. The work of all three artists challenges the very notion of transgressive sex, promulgated by sexual revolutionaries and counterrevolutionaries alike—both of whom neglected realms of experience and desire that complicate human sexuality. Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon deliberately spotlight

those complexities in order to counter this pervasive simplification. Twisting the utopian claims of Reich, Marcuse, Brown and the generation that followed them, their work is rooted in a particular mid-1970s moment, when the Freudian opposition between natural desire and cultural repression was, after over a half-century of entrenchment, thrown into doubt.<sup>33</sup> It was arguably the failures of the sexual revolution, exacerbated by its flagrant commercialization, that led to this reassessment. As with the defusing of rock rebelliousness, this new approach to sexuality coincided with the formative years of Kelley and Pettibon and with a shift toward greater and more direct social engagement in McCarthy's work. In its wake, these artists repeatedly attack the cultural construction of sex—the *a priori* standards by which it is discussed and classified, presented and represented. They portray it as an artifice buttressed by an idealistic discourse that grants it genuine social and political agency, and which relied upon two basic myths—sex as natural and sex as transgressive. Both take the nature-culture polarity as a given. Depicting the romanticization and the demonization of sexuality as simply inversions of one other, Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon expose the contradictions of reductive schema central to each.

### **Coitus Interruptus**

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<sup>33</sup> It must be mentioned here that Marcuse ultimately backtracked from his original position, revealing his own misgivings regarding sexual liberation in the United States, which he increasingly saw as unlikely. In *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), he recognized that desublimated sexuality was being channeled into commercialized forms of advertising and entertainment and was thus being exploited by capitalism (Escoffier, xxxiii).

Lined with steel, insulated in pink fiberglass and framed in plywood, Kelley's *Orgone Shed* (1992) (fig. 48) was built according to the detailed diagrams and instructions displayed on the wall beside it. These plans, however, are not the artist's own. The seven-foot-tall booth is a reconstruction of an Orgone Energy Accumulator, a device invented in the 1950s by Wilhelm Reich. Though a progenitor of the sexual revolution, Reich is more well known today for his later, more esoteric contentions. Recognized as the father of "orgonomy," he designed and marketed these structures as collectors of a kind of libidinal force field that supposedly flowed in the earth's atmosphere (Reich even claimed that it affected weather patterns). As the theory went, patients could use the Accumulator to absorb orgone energy and thus achieve full sexual release.<sup>34</sup> In 1954, Reich was charged by the FDA with violating the Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act, due to his increasingly outlandish and misleading claims—namely, that the apparatus could cure everything from impotence to cancer.<sup>35</sup> A judge ordered all Accumulators destroyed and his books banned. Reich was jailed in 1956 for refusing to comply, and he died there eight months later.

Though expertly crafted, Kelley's edifice is a "nouveau" variation on a thoroughly outdated trend. A half-century after Reich's formulation of orgonomy, the device seems quaintly obsolete, if not utterly ridiculous. Without passing any sort of definitive judgment on Reich's ideas, Kelley plays off of this contemporary point of view. His use of the term "shed" instead of "accumulator," for example, reduces it from metaphysical instrument to backyard storage container, deflating Reich's lofty claims by

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<sup>34</sup> Escoffier, xvii.

<sup>35</sup> Talese, 193.

associating the contraption with a prefab tool shed.<sup>36</sup> Kelley takes this demotion even further, installing a roll of toilet paper inside his chamber. The spiritual pretensions of Reich's sexual-energy collector are therefore brazenly mocked, as this classic manifestation of idealized sexuality is downgraded to a public outhouse or masturbation haven.

Also from the early 1990s, McCarthy's series of motorized sculptures offer similar degradations of sex. Departing from the orgiastic slop of his earlier performances and videos, these works are populated by impassive individuals engaged in joyless sexual activity. Here, sex is literally dehumanized, presented as a set of endlessly repetitive, robotic motions with no climax whatsoever. It is reduced to simple, pre-programmed mechanics, to the mere churning of hips—back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. The specific acts performed by such passionless automata are, however, patently perverse. By staging these impotent gesticulations within obscene contexts, McCarthy elicits contradictory responses that impugn an array of presumptions about sexuality. His vision is harrowing, dystopian—a marked contrast to the euphoric claims of the sexual revolution.

*The Garden* (1991-92) is a room-sized thicket of trees, rocks, grass and leaves. At first glance, the work appears to be an uninhabited fragment of television scenery, which in fact it is; McCarthy appropriated a discarded stage-set from the TV western, *Bonanza*.<sup>37</sup> However, amidst the trunks and foliage, an unexpectedly sordid scene can be

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<sup>36</sup> Mike Kelley, interview with Isabelle Graw, in *Mike Kelley* (Phaidon), 24.

<sup>37</sup> Rugoff, "Mr. McCarthy's Neighborhood," 61. *Bonanza* was a popular American television series, airing from 1959 to 1973.

glimpsed—as though the viewer has stumbled upon some heathen forest ritual. Here, a middle-aged man, pants at his ankles, repeatedly humps a tree, while a younger boy (his son?) fucks a hole in the ground.<sup>38</sup> Simultaneously droll and jarring, preposterous and perverted, the assemblage biting caricatures the assumed alignment of sex and nature—one which gives rise to a range of excessively “naturalized” views of sexuality.

Everything, including the nature itself, is thus rendered explicitly un-natural. Though the wooded terrain possesses a high degree of verisimilitude, its illusionism immediately breaks down when removed from the tightly framed television screen for which it was intended. In person, the trees end mid-trunk, and the land is revealed to be just a simple wood scaffold covered by strips of Astroturf grass, plastic leaves and synthetic rocks. Similarly, the figures who populate the scene are at once highly realistic and conspicuously artificial. Their movements are spasmodic, their flesh sickly—detailed, but waxy and buckling at the joints—somewhere between department store mannequin and Madame Tussaud portrait. Meanwhile, the acts they perform are themselves wholly impure. Unclassifiable and supremely abnormal, these are literally crimes against nature. And again, as in all of McCarthy’s robotic tableaux, sex is reduced to a simple sequence of automated interactions with inanimate objects.<sup>39</sup> In fact, as the father figure monotonously screws his stump, the motor which thrusts his pelvis in and out is exposed, while its hum permeates the room. As Rugoff puts it in “Mr. McCarthy’s Neighborhood,” *The Garden* “ironically celebrates mechanized sexuality,” portraying it

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid..

<sup>39</sup> Cameron, 61.

as anything but natural.<sup>40</sup> Sex is thus not some intrinsic expression of desire, but a conditioned routine.

Both the structure of the piece and its implicit narrative suggest this conclusion. McCarthy's use of the stage-set insinuates that what is deemed "natural" is actually framed by the artifices of media, typically concealed but here made obvious. While the work's specific reference is to television, it also implicates a much broader—and particularly American—tradition of idealized nature. As Rugoff points out, this tradition extends from the romantic paintings of the Hudson River School and American Luminist movement to today's Sierra Club calendars, "the nature-lover's equivalent of pin-up nudes." Such depictions effectively fetishize nature as an expanse of virginal space, a land of milk and honey untainted by culture. Indeed, as Rugoff points out, these visions are highly sexualized, offering "a necrophiliac landscape, where one gazes upon embalmed and idealized objects of desire."<sup>41</sup>

Such nature fantasies similarly underlay a range of sixties-era phenomena, from ecological activism and the rise of the environmental movement to a near-religious veneration of the land, which inspired agricultural communes and other back-to-nature endeavors. In all of these, nature is positioned in opposition to Western civilization and its oppressive materialism. That it was also commonly personified as a fertile female—as Mother Earth or the Greek goddess, Gaia—underscored that fetishization. McCarthy takes this to a laughable extreme, actually endowing the land with a set of sexual orifices. Meanwhile, the implied father-son relationship of the man and boy alludes to the

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<sup>40</sup> Rugoff, "Mr. McCarthy's Neighborhood," 66.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

pedagogic process by which such idealizations are not only perpetuated, but themselves naturalized—made to seem inborn rather than social. Thus, Rugoff explains, “*The Garden* implicitly and humorously links this cultural tradition of the picturesque to the perversity of patriarchal culture, where domineering male desire expresses itself in an infatuation with controlled environments.”<sup>42</sup> The work parodies the rites of passage by which sexual constructs are handed down from one generation to the next, indoctrinated until they seem innate. *The Garden* effectively undoes this process by situating it within a setting of blatantly un-natural nature. The work lampoons the elaborate intertwining of sex and nature by those who celebrated the former as an ideal affirmation of the latter. McCarthy’s figures love Mother Nature a bit too much. His scene of men fucking the land is an absurdly literal manifestation of sexualized nature and naturalized sex, exposing the dubiousness of both.

Yet, while it openly attacks such idealizations, the work also precludes recourse to their supposed opposite—that is, the characteristically American fear of sex. The inhabitants of this garden are vulgar embodiments of original sin; having eaten the forbidden fruit, they literally defile nature. In this sense, the work offers a view of primal man, an Adam who, fallen from grace, now must “work” the land along with his offspring. It therefore parodies the condemnation of sex by those who do not celebrate increased permissiveness, but rather see it as a potent threat to morality. A Puritan nightmare of unholy hedonism, McCarthy’s *Garden* of anti-Eden parodies this disparate yet equally questionable linking of sex and nature, along with its original biblical source.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 61.

*The Garden* thus simultaneously counteracts two contrary, but similarly reductive, views of sex—as inherently good and natural and as corrupting, sinful, evil. As with previously discussed works, the sculpture operates against so-called progressives, who advocate a sexual revolution, and conservatives, who warn that such liberation would beget the decline of civilization. Eschewing these facile conceptualizations, McCarthy’s attacks the terms and categories of the nature-culture opposition underlying both sides of the issue. The work thus epitomizes the shift from a consideration of the sex itself to the ways in which sexual activities are learned and given meaning through socialization and conditioning.

This process of indoctrination constitutes the primary theme in *Family Tyranny* (1987) (fig. 49), a collaborative video-performance by McCarthy and Kelley. Subtitled “Modeling and Molding” and set in a wood-paneled basement, the work transforms a cliché of father-son bonding into a warped lesson in sexual abuse. The first scene features a shirtless, infantile father (McCarthy) sadistically punishing his son—actually a Styrofoam head on a stick—who he claims has been a “very bad boy.” As he drives a funnel into the boy’s mouth and forces a lumpy liquid concoction down his throat, the father repeatedly chants “my daddy did this to me; you can do this to your son.” Incidentally, a remarkably similar interaction appears in a 1986 Pettibon drawing from *Bottomless Pond* (fig. 50), in which a naked man holds up a young boy and looks down at his crotch. “It may not seem like fun for you now,” he explains, “but when you’re a big boy you’ll be doing the same things I do.” Both works imply that such perversities are caused not by flaws in nature, but through acculturation; they are learned, handed down from generation to generation.

In the next scene from *Family Tyranny*, the naughty son is played by Kelley, who tries desperately—but thoroughly in vain—to flee this paternal inculcation. “You’re gonna be sorry you have me for a dad when I get through,” the father warns, as he chases the helpless bawling boy around the room. When the child tries to escape through the window, the camera angle shifts to the exterior, exposing the structure of the set and rupturing its illusionism. Like *The Garden*’s obviously fake nature, this highlights the artificiality of the environment and the activity it contains. The entire work takes on the air of a staged event, a performance of a social script. In the final scene, the son once again takes the form of a doll—this time a tiny plastic toy—and what was already a quite disturbing affair turns truly sinister. While he methodically molests his boy, the father maniacally moans “I’m sorry; I’m so sorry” and “Daddy’s little boy.” As Philip Monk notes in his essay on the collaborative works of Kelley and McCarthy, “A Twisted Pedagogy” (2000), *Family Tyranny* ultimately presents “a household where the reproduction of authority...[is] replayed and passed on in family (sexual) abuse.”<sup>43</sup>

This notion of sexual mis-education is echoed by *Cultural Gothic* (1992) (fig. 51), another of McCarthy’s rude robotic sculptures. Upon a raised platform, a life-sized man stands with his hands on the shoulders of his son, who’s pelvis is lined up with the rump of a stuffed goat. The automated boy and animal turn back to the supervising father, who gives them an encouraging nod. The son then gyrates against the haunches of his goat in an act of simulated bestiality, while the father again nods approvingly. The cycle is repeated indefinitely. Like *The Garden*, *Cultural Gothic* portrays man screwing nature.

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<sup>43</sup> Philip Monk, ed., *Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy: Collaborative Works* (Toronto: Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, 2000), 11.

It is another caricature of the indoctrination of sexual standards, particularly of how culturally constructed distinctions between the natural and unnatural inform definitions of normal and abhorrent activity. As Rugoff concludes, McCarthy stages this “lesson in goat-fucking”

not as a hillbilly crime against nature, but as a phase in the developmental ‘norm’, an initiation ritual into a patriarchal system based on mastery, where men learn to dominate sexual partners as if they were inarticulate objects. Rather than simply shocking bourgeois sensibilities, his work aims to make visible the libidinal and social dynamics veiled by civilized appearances.<sup>44</sup>

Indeed, while bestiality is one of Western culture’s most essential taboos, it is here presented as a routine stage in white, middle-class education. With their J. Crew-catalogue attire and clean-cut looks, the man and boy are a model of familial relations, the scene a tender moment of father-son bonding. In fact, unlike the pernicious acts performed in *The Garden* and *Family Tyranny*, the relationship between the boy and the goat in *Cultural Gothic* is never actually consummated. Instead, it is “a dry run, an air fuck,” as Rugoff puts it.<sup>45</sup> Decidedly clean, the work offers nothing really lecherous. Yet, its decorum renders it considerably more discomfiting than had it been explicitly pornographic. Its potency stems from the modesty and apparent wholesomeness of the figures and the matter-of-fact way in which they perform what appears to be a customary pedagogic ritual. A vision of normalized abnormalcy, the work destabilizes a range of basic social mores.

*Cultural Gothic* also depicts a form of sexuality conveniently ignored by romantic appeals for total sexual liberation. If, as Reich and his disciples theorized, the complete

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<sup>44</sup> Rugoff, “Mr. McCarthy’s Neighborhood,” 65-6.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

elimination of repression is a path to social utopia, what then are we to do with McCarthy's scene? Does it follow that such acts should likewise be encouraged? Bestiality has existed at least as far back as antiquity. Freud himself acknowledges it as “by no means rare, especially among country people,” this latter point supporting his contention that sex with animals is not a sign of insanity, but simply a product of convenience.<sup>46</sup> It is as “natural” as any of the other non-reproductive sexual activities that Marcuse and Brown saw as liberating. Yet, bestiality is typically associated with the barbaric Other—with either savage “primitives” or, as Freud implies, hicks who take such liberties with their livestock. (The latter is specifically evoked by the McCarthy’s title, a play on Grant Wood’s famous representation of pastoral Puritanism, *American Gothic*.<sup>47</sup>) Defined in opposition to such cultural stereotypes, the strict ban on interspecies intercourse is a hallmark of proper civilization.

“You shall not lie with any beast and defile yourself with it” instructs Leviticus 18:23. As with most of its sexual and dietary commandments, the Bible does not specify God’s reasoning, yet the behavior must have been prominent enough to be in need of proscription. In her landmark study, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966), social anthropologist Mary Douglas acknowledges this point. However, through close analysis of the biblical text, she shows that sexual mores were implemented not because these acts were considered inherently unnatural, nor because of concerns about hygiene, health or, in the case of bestiality, the unconsenting

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<sup>46</sup> Sigmund Freud, “The Sexual Aberrations,” in *Sigmund Freud: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 1962), 14.

<sup>47</sup> Rugoff, “Mr. McCarthy’s Neighborhood,” 65.

animal. Instead, they were designed, and continue to be enforced, in support of a social system founded upon fixed and clear-cut categories.<sup>48</sup> “Holiness means keeping distinct the categories of creation,” Douglas explains. “It therefore involves correct definition, discrimination and order.”<sup>49</sup> Notions of “purity” thus serve laws of culture rather than nature. The role of sexual prohibition is to preserve distinctions necessary the stability of conventions, institutions and relations.

Bestiality is therefore deemed “dangerous” because it constitutes a taxonomic violation; it is irreconcilable with definitive classifications. Both natural and unnatural, it is a taboo *par excellence*—not intrinsically abominable, but considered so because, in Douglas’s terms, it disrupts categories and confuses species.<sup>50</sup> *Cultural Gothic* thus seems to embody an alternate social order, one in which such distinctions are not essential. Animals can therefore serve as shameless sexual surrogates for maturing children. “Normal” and “natural” sexuality—along with its supposed opposite—is implicitly recast as a contrivance, exposing the plasticity of such values. The sweeping implications of this realization pose a challenge to a fixed nature-culture opposition, along with the various theories based upon it. This includes both the Freudian contention that sexual restraint is a positive part of the civilizing process and the Reichian belief that it is an agent of oppressive control. Both Freud and Reich take the innate naturalness of sex for granted, an assumption rendered problematic by McCarthy’s bizarre scene. Like

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<sup>48</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966), 140.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

*The Garden and Family Tyranny, Cultural Gothic* is unsettling because it proposes that sex is thoroughly scripted; it is a learned, rather than inborn, activity. Fucking an animal may therefore not be so unnatural and amoral after all—not any more so than, say, eating one.

Suggesting that nature and culture are indivisibly intertwined, these works thus stand in open contradiction to overly reductive and romanticized conceptions of sexuality—echoing Kelley’s more direct attack on Reich’s convictions. Pettibon’s drawings also implicitly address such idealizations. Employing a strategy similar to that of McCarthy’s animatronics, they expose the dark—and typically overlooked—potential of complete libidinal emancipation. Rather than an agent of liberation, sex is depicted as an instrument of oppression, cruelty and insecurity. These images range from comical portrayals of sexual dysfunction to more harrowing scenes of rape, domestic abuse, and other forms of sexual violence. Overall, the effects of these drawings are twofold; they expose the naïveté of utopian sexuality but also throw its antithesis into question. Sexuality is portrayed as a corrupting force, yet the black humor of the works prevents them from being read as straight condemnations of sexual excess. Instead, they contain a full range of erotic impulses—heterosexual, homosexual, incestuous, pedophilic, sadomasochistic—all presented as rather quotidian. Morality is not stable in Pettibon’s world, and the only discernable judgment emerging from these drawings is an implicit opposition to rigid sexual categories and classifications.

In an image from *A New Wave of Violence* (1982) (fig. 52), a horrified woman embraces a naked man in a bathtub, blood streaming down his arms, a suicide note scrawled on the mirror: “I don’t want to live without love.” The motive is ambiguous. Is

he the betrayer or the betrayed? Either way, the scene transforms romance into a convolution of complex emotions and unfulfilled desire. However, the subject of suicide in response to unrequited love is a standard theme of Western culture. Pettibon's drawing thus portrays a graphic climax to an archetypal narrative in which love is prized over life. Yet, he tweaks his version of chivalrous martyrdom, adding a touch of gallows humor. Along with his bloodied wrists, this Romeo sports a prominent erection, suggesting some sort of masochistic stimulation at the suicidal moment—a profane, and rather funny, conflation of self-abuse and self-arousal. In typical fashion, Pettibon has reformulated the romantic cliché, with its utopian notions of Eros and sex, in order to complicate the basic ideals it takes for granted. His scene of masturbatory suicide thrusts the apotheosis of pure love into a dicier realm, the equally “natural” link between pleasure and pain.

Such images of suicide and sadomasochism are actually on the tamer side of Pettibon's arsenal. Others are considerably more belligerent, venturing into nastier spheres of sexuality. In a drawing from *console, heal, or depict...*(1984) (fig. 53), a man towers over a girl clutching a stuffed teddy bear, her nose bloodied and eye blackened. “O.K., THAT WAS BILL,” he recaps. “THAT BRINGS US UP TO SEPTEMBER '74. YOU HAD AN AFFAIR WITH HIM BUT DID NOT LOVE HIM...WHO WAS IT NEXT?” The implicit narrative is unclear; she is being brutally punished for her previous relationships, but by whom? Her possessive lover? Her tyrannical father? Either way, the scene is a discomfiting blend of domination, jealousy, and sadistic psychological and physical abuse. Pettibon's 1985 zine, *The Express Sex Train*, is populated by a similarly unwholesome bunch, including fierce dominatrixes, a love-sick Nazi, a

castrating woman, pedophilic parents, and incestuous siblings doing it “THE WAY MOM N’ DAD DID IT, LIKING IT.” In one especially disconcerting image (fig. 54), a man stands in his boxer shorts holding a tiny naked woman (or is it a doll?) in his hand. “YOU ARE THE FIRST GIRL I’VE MET—BESIDES MY DAUGHTER—WHO LIKES DISNEYLAND AS MUCH AS SEX,” he informs her. The drawing is at once an unsettling evocation of child abuse, a sickly comical twist on family relations, and a caricature of female objectification and patriarchal authority. Yet, these references refuse to gel into a unified meaning. Instead, they clash with each other, forming a perverse mix of contradictory—but equally disturbing—interpretations.

As with Kelley’s shed and McCarthy’s robots, such works reflect a climate in which the utopian promises of unbridled sexuality seem hopelessly naïve, if not consciously deceptive. Offering emphatically messy notions of sex, all three artists contaminate overly antiseptic and antiquated beliefs. Their representations preclude the idealization of sexuality, either by recasting it as an artificial construct or by spotlighting lecherous desires conveniently overlooked by quixotic promises of free love. Both strategies invalidate the idea of coition as a conduit for sociopolitical change. Like his Shang-A-Lang drawing, a page from Pettibon’s 1990 zine—aptly titled *The Pleasure-Giving Arts*—locates the moment of this disillusionment (fig. 55). In the midst of shooting up, a naked woman casually brags to her partner, “I’VE GIVEN ABOUT 10 FUZZ THE CLAP THIS MONTH.” The hardcore drug abuse and outmoded slang, coupled with the man’s mutton-chop sideburns, handlebar moustache and afro hairdo, definitively dates the scene in the 1970s. Increased permissiveness and promiscuity have apparently failed to bring about the return to Eden once guaranteed of them. The work

calls the institutional structures of patriarchy into question, suggesting that the police are not who we think (or wish) they were. Meanwhile, sex is presented as a weapon of revenge and an agent of disease, rather than liberation. The image epitomizes the generational transition from sexual utopianism to disillusionment and indifference.

Thus, Pettibon once again casts the seventies as a foil for the sixties. Such drawings identify what was indeed a pivotal juncture in the history of sexuality—one which has subsequently informed the work of Kelley and McCarthy as well. In the 1970s, following the decline of the sexual revolution, the theory of sex underwent a profound overhaul. It was then that sociologists John H. Gagnon and William Simon launched a seminal attack on previous misconceptions. Having studied at the Kinsey Institute for Sex Research in the late 1960s, Gagnon and Simon developed a social constructionist theory of sexuality fundamentally at odds with the Freudian standard and its various revisions. Their *Sexual Conduct: The Social Sources of Human Sexuality* (1973) was the first formulation of sexual activity as fundamentally social—as opposed to purely instinctual—behavior.<sup>51</sup>

Challenging deep-seated assumptions about human conduct, Gagnon and Simon denounced the “unspoken belief in the existence of natural man, a man who has innate transhistorical and transcultural attributes and needs.” In particular, they argued, it was the understanding of sexual life that had been most tainted by this view, since “at no point is the belief in the natural and universal human more entrenched than in the study of sexuality.” As an alternative, Gagnon and Simon turned “from a consideration of the

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<sup>51</sup> As Jeffery Escoffier recently commented, “no one before them had written so thoroughgoing a social interpretation of sexuality.” (Escoffier, 555).

organs themselves to the sources of the meanings that are attached to them, 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.” This perspective, they argued, is missing from Freud and his followers, since “at not point in psychoanalytic theory is there an extended consideration of the physical activities of sexual behavior and the ways in which these physical activities themselves require systematic linkage to social roles and social meanings.”<sup>52</sup>

In contrast, Gagnon and Simon characterized human sexuality as a scripted performance under the veil of “nature.” As a result of this disguise, they contended, “we fail to observe that the doing of sex (even when alone) requires elaborated and sequential learning that is largely taken from other domains of life and a resultant etiquette that allows for the coordination of bodies and meanings in a wide variety of circumstances.” Yet, for Gagnon and Simon, not only have the rules of sexual activity been socially determined, but so have the supposedly elemental desires themselves. “The very experience of sexual excitement that seems to originate from hidden internal sources,” they explained, “is in fact a learned process and it is only our insistence on the myth of naturalness that hides these social components from us.” Gagnon and Simon’s demystification of natural sexuality did not, however, deny the role of biological processes. Rather, it effectively opposed the “biological determinism” that stems from an over-emphasis on those processes, a determinism not applied to other, non-sexual forms

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<sup>52</sup> John H. Gagnon and William Simon, *Sexual Conduct: The Social Sources of Human Sexuality* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1973), 2-5.

of human behavior. In fact, the tendency to see sexuality as purely instinctual is, for Gagnon and Simon, especially erroneous, since “the sexual area may be precisely that realm wherein the superordinate position of the sociocultural over the biological level is most complete.”<sup>53</sup>

*Sexual Conduct* thus abandoned the nature-culture polarity upon which the sexual revolution was founded. It also contradicted Reich’s claim that repression was invented by the dominant class in order to restrain individual freedom—a belief which sat at the core of his politicization of sexuality. While Gagnon and Simon acknowledged that contemporary notions of sexuality originated in earlier social orders, they suggested that the impetus

may not have been a need to constrain severely the powerful sexual impulse in order to maintain social stability, or limit inherently antisocial force, but rather a matter of having *to invent an importance for sexuality*. This would not only assure a high level of reproductive activity but also proved socially available rewards unlimited by natural resources, rewards that promote conforming behavior in sectors of social life far more important than the sexual.<sup>54</sup>

For Gagnon and Simon, it is the *over*-emphasis on the sexual—rather than suppression of it—that aids social conformity, stability and order.

Extrapolating this notion, one could infer that the fight against repression in all its forms was not only misguided but actually beneficial to the system it claimed to target. It also ignored the fact that desire and repression, rather than being mutually exclusive, actually feed off of each other. The erotic is frequently enhanced, if not entirely defined, by taboo itself—by the thrill of treading in forbidden realms that are actually established

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 8-15.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 17; my italics.

by the forces of repression. Refuting “the prevailing image of the sexual drive as a basic biological mandate that presses against and must be controlled by the cultural and social matrix,”<sup>55</sup> Gagnon and Simon initiated their own “revolution” in the understanding of sexuality—but theirs had frustrating consequences for those who saw sexual freedom as a path to political liberation. For sex cannot be used against the cultural order if sexuality itself is not only a product but a primary reinforcer of that order.

In the years following *Sexual Conduct*, Michel Foucault similarly emphasized the socially constructed “nature” of sexuality. With *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (1976), he rendered explicit what is implied by Gagnon and Simon’s study—that the pervasive notion of sexuality as a battle between repression and desire had only confused the issue. This binary is, according to Foucault, deceiving because its two supposedly opposing sides are, in fact, both products of the same system.<sup>56</sup> Shifting attention to “the production of sexuality rather than the repression of sex,” Foucault further repudiated the nature-culture polarity and the notion of politicized sexuality it spawned.<sup>57</sup>

Foucault’s argument is founded on his contention that forces of control are not externally imposed on a subject, but rather constitute an all-subsuming power—one which contains both the limits placed on behavior and the defiance of those limits. Explaining that resistance itself can “play the role of adversary, target, support, or handle

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>56</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 81.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 114.

in power relations,” he revealed that transgression is part and parcel of the system it apparently opposes—a system impossible to transcend. “Hence,” he claimed, “there is no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary.”<sup>58</sup>

Regarding the politics of sex, Foucault wondered whether the then-recent attempt to overcome repression was therefore not only ineffective, but fundamentally naïve, since it is the power structure that defines what is acceptable and unacceptable, licit and illicit, normal and deviant. It was the naturalization of sexuality—and the consequent belief that sexuality harbors some essential truth knowable only through it—that led to its politicization, to people “linking together the processes that make it possible to free oneself both of repression and of domination and exploitation.”<sup>59</sup> Yet, to Foucault, such thinking is profoundly delusional. It overlooks

all the ruses that were employed for centuries to make us love sex, to make the knowledge of it desirable and everything said about it precious, . . . the strategies by which we were induced to apply all our skills to discovering its secrets, by which we were attached to the obligation to draw out its truth, and made guilty for having failed to recognize it for so long.<sup>60</sup>

Hence, the binding of sexual liberation to political revolution is oxymoronic, for “to go questing after a desire that is beyond the reach of power” is to ignore the fact that

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 95-6.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 131-2. Foucault traced this belief in sexuality as a container of essential truths to nineteenth century bourgeois society and its focus on talking about sex “as if it suspected sex of harboring a fundamental secret.” (Ibid., 69).

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 159.

“power...is constitutive of desire itself.” So-called liberation is, in this sense, shown to be a form of submission. “You are,” Foucault emphasized, “always-already trapped.”<sup>61</sup>

Thus, while acknowledging that the movement had helped individuals explore their sexualities, he concluded that it did so without any of its intended political consequences.<sup>62</sup> In fact, he argued, it had had quite opposite effects, enabling increased cultural control over that very sexuality through the ensuing expansion of the discourse on sex. Indeed, the sexual revolution was, in practice, as much about what could be discussed and seen as it was about what could be enacted in the bedroom. Though it is debatable how much the movement actually effected long-term changes in people’s sexual behavior, there is no doubt that it generated an enormous increase in public openness about sexual subject-matter—“a veritable discursive explosion,” as Foucault put it.<sup>63</sup>

This was problematic, he argued, because it is discourse itself—rather than repression—that effectively constructs sexuality and therefore sets the stage for its control. Foucault pointed out that this not a new development, but rather a long-standing process, stemming from the Catholic confessional and solidified in the sixteenth century by the Council of Trent’s sacrament of penance. It was then that “an imperative was established: Not only will you confess to acts containing the law, but you will seek to

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 81-83.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 131-2.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 17-18.

transform your desire, your everyday desire, into discourse.” Sex had to be discussed in order to be “regulated for the greater good of all.”<sup>64</sup>

In modern societies, this regulation was achieved through social discourses that attempted to define sexuality. The naming and classification of different practices—which began in the eighteenth century—became the first step to managing them. In the nineteenth century, this manifested itself in the burgeoning field of psychology, which almost obsessively sought to identify sexual tendencies, not only distinguishing the abnormal from the normal, but splitting the various “pathologies” into subtypes.<sup>65</sup> Yet, this hardly produced greater tolerance of sexual difference; instead, it tended to reinforce the standards against which such deviations were defined. With the rise of repression as a primary theoretical focus in the twentieth century, the characterization of human sexuality as an opposition between nature and culture was fixed. The increased candidness about sex in the 1960s and 70s was, according to Foucault, not only part of this lineage but an enhancement of the basic system of control through discourse. “The irony of this,” he concluded, “is in having us believe that our ‘liberation’ is in the balance.”<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 19-24.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 38-43. Foucault lists a number of these nineteenth century subtypes, including zoophiles (those with an excessive attraction to animals) and zooerasts (those who have sex with animals), mixoscopophiles (those who enjoy watching their lovers have sex with others), gynecomasts (those with an excessive attraction to women), sexoesthetic inverts (those who assume the manners, habits and dress of the opposite sex) and dyspareunist women (women who do not enjoy sex), yet he does not provide definitions of them. Definitions provided here were taken from *Bodies and Pleasures: Foucault and the Politics of Sexual Normalization*, by Ladelle McWhorter (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 237, n.19.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 159.

In a 1975 article titled “Beyond the Sexual Revolution,” *Newsweek* columnist Bob Greene insinuated that the movement had turned passé, noting that marvels such as wife-swapping and orgies had become “such old topics of suburban patio conversation that they are now considered somewhat dreary.”<sup>67</sup> Yet, in light of the arguments of Foucault and Gagnon and Simon, realizations like this were, for the most part, inconsequential. Whether or not the movement led to a true revolution in behavior was irrelevant because the debate was rigged from the start. This surfeit of sex chatter only reinforced the system. The sex-oriented work of Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon is grounded in this realization. It marks a shift away from the obsession with repression, toward an understanding of desire and restraint as not only interdependent, but comparably synthetic. Hence, these artists mock the idealization of sex as a panacea for society’s ills. Instead, they show it to be a product of traumatic conditioning—of the same diseased society it was supposedly meant to cure. Attacking artificial distinctions between nature and culture, they demythologize sexuality and thus short-circuit the possibility of a revolution based upon it.

### **Pornotopia**

In his 1975 video, *Sailor’s Meat* (fig. 26), McCarthy performs as the female protagonist of Russ Meyer’s soft-porn film, *Europe in the Raw* (1963).<sup>68</sup> Done up in

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<sup>67</sup> Bob Greene, “Beyond the Sexual Revolution,” *Newsweek* (Sept. 29, 1975): 13.

<sup>68</sup> 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).

black lace lingerie, heavy makeup and a turgidly seductive expression, he/she meanders across the room, methodically exposing different body parts, fortuitously accentuated by cropped close-ups. Replete with standard symbols of salaciousness—seedy motel-like room, musty lighting, squeaky bed, implicit voyeurism—the scene is conventionally kinky, sleazy in an entirely porn-traditional way.

However, the work quickly deviates from this rather banal sexual fantasy, devolving into something unexpectedly aberrant. Having shoved a hotdog up his ass, McCarthy positions himself on all fours and “goes down on” a pile of glistening raw liver, 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 liver, hotdogs and ketchup and thrusting his body back and forth with increasing agitation, as if simultaneously fucking and being fucked by it. With orgiastic indulgence, McCarthy transforms this plethora of squishy meats and condiments into materials of erotic desire and pleasure.

As in a number of aforementioned works from this period, these excessively sordid—yet wholly equivocal—acts cunningly toy with viewers’ expectations. What had initially appeared to be a generic transvestite masturbation scene is suddenly rendered traditional in light of McCarthy’s adaptation. In fact, the work is essentially a caricature of that soft-core pornographic trope. *Sailor’s Meat* provokes a displacement of terms, as the raunchy underworld of cross-dressing, striptease, hourly motels and X-rated films forfeits its constitutive position as an antithesis to “normal” sexuality. Instead, the porn convention is itself recast as the normative standard, in relation to which McCarthy’s meat orgy is perceived as *really* vulgar. This displacement is akin to that effected by

McCarthy and Kelley's musical dissonancies, which render supposedly radical rock conventional by contrast. The *Sailor's Meat* performance similarly destabilizes standard distinctions by establishing an opposition between ordinary transgression and a new, more perverse incarnation. It enacts a shift of categories that underscores their fundamental relativity. By thrusting the traditionally abnormal into a position of normality, the dirty effectively becomes clean.

The work thus dislodges the fundamental opposition upon which notions of taboo rely. As Douglas points out, defilement is never an isolated event. It can only occur as a "by-product of a systematic ordering and classification," in which distinctions between clean and dirty, acceptable and repellant, remain unambiguous. The stability of these categories is not overtly imposed, but rather is a product of a culturally determined "total structure of thought" that maintains them as givens.<sup>69</sup> That such structures are completely dependent on the social mores of a specific time and place evinces their malleability. Indeed, the acknowledgement of the dirty as only meaningful in relation to the clean (and useful only in its reinforcement of that very cleanliness) is, according to Douglas, the first step toward recognizing the conditionality of the entire system.

*Sailor's Meat* incites just that type of recognition through a kind of anthropological reshuffling. Its internal slippages and contradictions expose the interdependence of terms and the contingency of categorical judgment. McCarthy's use of common foodstuffs enhances this effect. These are things not only tolerated but ingested on a daily basis. They are ubiquitous, neutrally-coded substances—staples of cupboards, lunchboxes and family barbecues across America. Yet, food itself is also a

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<sup>69</sup> Douglas, 35-41.

major category of taboo, its misuse providing further insight into cultural order.<sup>70</sup> McCarthy's conversion of meats and condiments into fetishistic body parts and grossly sexualized fluids prompts a destabilization of signs as well as categories. Ketchup becomes blood, mayonnaise cum, and meat genitalia, through a process of simple displacement. The work renders mainstream materials marginal—for, as Douglas points out, such bodily substances are “marginal stuff of the most obvious kind.”<sup>71</sup> The smut that they come to embody underscores her point that dirtiness is not some intrinsic state of being, but rather it is simply the result of “matter out of place,”<sup>72</sup> a condition entirely relative to specific situation and use. Along with its muddling of culturally conditioned distinctions, *Sailor's Meat* thus elicits a broad reflection on the assumed meanings of everyday things. The classification of materials as either repulsive or desirable is shown to be determined by a social system that is essentially symbolic and conditional—as are correlating rules of abomination and perversion.

Hence, just as the dirty becomes clean through the dislodging of deviancy, the clean becomes dirty through the work's misuse of substances. However, this latter transformation remains definitively incomplete. As is typical of his performances, McCarthy makes clear the true identities of his materials. Ketchup is always taken directly from the bottle, mayo from the jar, the meat from its shrink-wrapped package. The artifice of the illusion is not only revealed, but emphasized. Rather than simply exchanging one set of equivalences for another, the viewer continually oscillates between

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 35-6.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 35.

readings—ketchup as blood, ketchup as ketchup—which somehow coexist despite their supposed mutual exclusivity. McCarthy forces contradictory connotations upon single substances and allows them to remain in suspension, unresolved. The effect is especially dramatic due to the extreme discord of those very connotations—wholesome Americana on one hand and deviant sexuality on the other.

Thus, the work lays bare the process of placing meaning upon supposedly neutral substances, a process of ordering and classification that is wholly dependent on context.

As Douglas explains:

It is a relative idea. 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; similarly, bathroom equipment in the dining room; clothing lying on chairs; outdoor things indoors; upstairs things downstairs; under-clothing appearing where over-clothing should be, and so on. In short, our pollution behavior is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications.<sup>73</sup>

It is the misuse or misplacement of things that causes them to be deemed “dirty,” while purity is essentially “a matter of separating that which should be separated.”<sup>74</sup> It follows, therefore, that neither deviance nor normalcy are intrinsic qualities.

Again, however, McCarthy’s does not simply “leave cooking utensils in the bedroom, or food bespattered on clothing.” His is a two-fold strategy of conceptual dislocation and relocation. Through a process of simultaneous illusion and anti-illusion, he coaxes viewers to draw lines, categorize and make distinctions that are then rendered problematic. *Sailor’s Meat’s* implication that the erotic is dependent upon context more than anything is confirmed by Gagnon and Smith, who recognize that most carnal acts

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 35-6.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 53.

also occur in circumstances that are not at all deemed sexual. Unless participants closely follow a particular script and recognize they are embedded in a sexual situation, they contend, “there will not be the potentiation of the physiological concomitants that Masters and Johnson have demonstrated as necessary in the production of sexual excitement and the orgasmic cycle.” Only two years after the publication of *Sexual Conduct*, McCarthy’s work suggests this same conclusion. *Sailor’s Meat* sexualizes typically nonsexual things and activities—namely food and eating—simply by satisfying the requisite convergence of gestures, motives and signs. As Gagnon and Smith point out, this introduction of sexuality where it does not belong is profoundly problematic, constituting “a violation of the expected social arrangement.”<sup>75</sup>

McCarthy thus opens a rift not only between symbol and symbolized, but between intellectual and emotional responses. He tapes a fake rubber hotdog onto his crotch. After again dousing himself with his meat-mixture—at each juncture, it seems to serve as some sort of sexual stimulant—he begins to violently tug on his prosthetic cock, stretching and pulling it as hard as he can, while yelping in apparent agony. Though he continuously makes the artificiality of his organ and self-mutilation obvious, the scene is nonetheless excruciating to behold. Likewise, when, with increasing ferocity, McCarthy repetitively jams his fake phallus into a mayonnaise jar while convulsing and making vomiting sounds, it is truly disturbing despite the clear innocuousness of the acts. At the end of the piece, he takes this process to its extreme, eliciting a decisive breakdown of signified meanings by employing real body fluids and performing acts of genuine self-abuse. The disgust one experienced earlier while watching the artist ingest mayo-as-cum,

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<sup>75</sup> Gagnon and Simon, 22-23.

for example, is later neutralized by the greater revulsion of watching him ingest his own urine, which is generally considered more deviant than eating either mayonnaise or real semen. Similarly, the excruciating vision of McCarthy violently wrenching his rubber dildo becomes nothing but simulation in comparison to the final scene, in which he presses his bare feet onto shards of broken glass. Actual pain and blood are thus made to rub up against their wholly symbolic correlatives.

In these ways, readings are set and experiences are had that are openly contradicted as the performance progresses. The essential catalyst for this is a grotesque mixing of different registers of meaning—symbolic and actual—which drives the work’s internal dynamics of signification out of whack. By logical extension, this affords a breakdown of the external system of signification which seeks to categorize certain substances and acts.<sup>76</sup> McCarthy’s performance is not taboo per se, for he effectively precludes such a designation *in primis*. Instead, the very notions of taboo, deviancy and perversion are shown to be entirely relative, along with what is subsequently considered acceptable and proper. Ultimately, the viewer is left dangling between terms, probably the most discomforting aspect of the work. The peepshow simply ends, without climax, without providing any opportunity for closure, explanation, or resolution. Having violated and ravaged meaning itself, McCarthy refuses to offer a way out of the mess he has created.

By thus exposing the fluidity of judgment, *Sailor’s Meat* disrupts categories fundamental to previous understandings of sexuality. The work implicitly negates the notion of sex as inherently subversive. In fact, McCarthy’s performance confirms that

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<sup>76</sup> Rugoff, “Mr. McCarthy’s Neighborhood,” 46.

sex is not inherently anything—a realization that recasts the transgressions identified by both the sexual revolution and the reaction against it. Yet, the specific target of *Sailor's Meat* is pornography, a subject also prevalent among sixties-era progressives and conservatives alike, and one which, by 1975, had grown especially prominent. It had been the topic of a heated public debate, prompted by the Presidential Commission on Pornography, authorized by the United States Congress in October of 1967.<sup>77</sup> In September 1970, the Commission released a 700 page report, which documented the growing popularity of pornography and openly questioned the efficacy of state-enforced sexual repression, recommending that “legislation prohibiting the sale, exhibition, or distribution of sexual materials to consenting adults be repealed.”<sup>78</sup> Meanwhile, porn went mainstream. “By 1970,” notes Walter Kendrick in *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture* (1987), “‘hard-core’ pornography had grown from...secretive, underworld stuff...into the subject of scores of books and almost daily articles in the popular press .”<sup>79</sup>

For those who understood *Deep Throat* as a sign of liberation, it seemed that the popularization of pornography would lead to the nullification of the term itself. The objective was to initiate a paradigm shift; once above ground, pornography would no longer be deemed pornographic. This change, it was believed, would signal a greater acceptance of sexuality, sexual difference, and an end to excessive repression.

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<sup>77</sup> Walter Kendrick, *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture* (New York, Viking, 1987), 213.

<sup>78</sup> Quoted in Kendrick, 216.

<sup>79</sup> Kendrick, 208.

Conservatives generally agreed, dreading such an outcome rather than celebrating it. In her 1967 essay, “The Pornographic Imagination,” Susan Sontag recognized this correlation. Both liberals and conservatives, she pointed out, saw pornography as indicating the same social and cultural issues, namely the legacy of Christian repression, physiological ignorance, and the dissolution of traditional family and political values. “Thus,” she concluded, “there is a fairly complete consensus about the *diagnosis* of pornography itself. The disagreements arise only in the estimate of the psychological and social *consequences* of its dissemination, and therefore in the formulation of tactics and policy.”<sup>80</sup>

Sontag’s point would soon after be confirmed when, having received the Commission on Pornography’s report in 1970, President Nixon promised that “so long as I am in the White House, there will be no relaxation of the national effort to control and eliminate smut from out national life.” “If an attitude of permissiveness were to be adopted regarding pornography,” he reasoned, “this would contribute to an atmosphere condoning anarchy in every other field—and would increase the threat to our social order as well as to our moral principles.”<sup>81</sup> Proponents of sexual liberation basically concurred. Revolutionaries and counterrevolutionaries were, it turned out, speaking the same language. Conceiving of sex in nearly identical terms, both invested it with political agency. Though Sontag’s essay dealt solely with literature, its implications were thus significantly broader. By acknowledging an underlying consensus amongst the two

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<sup>80</sup> Susan Sontag, “The Pornographic Imagination” (1967), reprinted in *Sexual Revolution*, ed. Jeffery Escoffier (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2003), 402.

<sup>81</sup> quoted in Kendrick, 219.

supposedly opposite sides of the argument, she set the stage for subsequent critiques by Foucault and others.

Essentially, what both the Left and Right had in common was an exaggerated notion of pornography and its effects. Each viewed it as a means of sexual liberation, a myth propagated by the porn convention itself. As Steven Marcus pointed out in his groundbreaking study of the subject, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England* (1964), pornography has always been founded upon a utopian fantasy. Removed from specific time and place, it represents an arena of idealistic permissiveness—a chimerical realm located, he insists, solely within “the infinite, barren, yet plastic space that exists within our skulls.”<sup>82</sup> Coining the term “pornotopia” to describe this fantasy, Marcus characterized it as a specifically modern convention, identifying its origins in seventeenth and eighteenth century bourgeois culture.<sup>83</sup>

In his later study of the subject, Kendrick acknowledged Marcus’s account, but also refined it. Kendrick homed in on the etymology of the word itself, which emerged out of modernity’s unique penchant for categorization. While what would eventually be deemed pornographic had indeed existed for centuries, the term did not surface until around 1850. It was, Kendrick explained, the solution to a crisis in classification, stemming from the then-recent discovery of X-rated antiquities at Pompeii. Its subsequent development thus “entailed the wholesale reorganization of the past to make

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<sup>82</sup> Steven Marcus, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England* (New York: Basic Books, 1966), 268.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 282.

room for a category the past had not recognized.”<sup>84</sup> Whereas the Romans could comfortably combine everyday life with obscenity, Victorian moderns could not. Specialized zones—both conceptual and physical—therefore had to be designated. As Kendrick explained:

What was required was a new taxonomy: if Pompeii’s priceless obscenities were to be properly managed, they would have to be systematically named and placed. The name chosen for them was “pornography,” and they were housed in the Secret Museum.<sup>85</sup>

To disrupt that taxonomy is therefore to disrupt the very existence of pornography. Marcus believed this was happening as he was writing his book in the mid-1960s. In keeping with the popular politics of the moment, he predicted that, with the growth of sexual liberation,

it seems likely that what we are witnessing today will be as important, momentous, and enduring as that other revolution in sensibility, manners, and attitudes which occurs in England during the latter part of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century and first part of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>86</sup>

The underlying assumption here is, once again, essentially the same as that of Nixon’s ominous warning. Both saw the open and legal publication of risqué material as a sign of cultural revolution—one which would render the category of pornography obsolete. “We are coming to the end of the era,” Marcus reasoned, “in which pornography had a historical meaning and even a historical function.”<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Kendrick, 31-2.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>86</sup> Marcus, 285.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

This alignment of the Right and Left on this issue—recognized by Sontag, and becoming increasingly apparent during the ensuing decade—led to a general rethinking of the underlying assumptions of both sides. This situation was further complicated by a number of developments that not only brought the issue to a head, but made the untenability of previous positions clear. Most prominently, distinctions between liberalism and conservatism were muddied by the anti-pornography crusade launched by organizations such as Women Against Pornography (WAP) in the early and mid-1970s. For these activists, pornography was a weapon of oppression and violence, systematically employed by men against women.<sup>88</sup> As Susan Brownmiller put it in *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (1975), “pornography, like rape, is a male invention, designed to dehumanize women, to reduce the female to an object of sexual access.”<sup>89</sup>

Though supposedly enlightened, this assertion was actually founded upon assumptions as similar to those of porn’s promoters. Equating image and reality, these “radical” feminists saw pornography as not only representing, but actually generating human behavioral norms—in this case, violence against women. As Kendrick points out, this created an irresolvable contradiction within feminist thought itself. While its proponents routinely claimed that misogynist violence had been endemic to Western culture from its beginning, they now proposed that the suppression of mass-produced pornography—at that point, only in existence for some twenty odd years—would somehow reduce this oppressive violence. More obvious, however, was the fact that the

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<sup>88</sup> Kendrick, 227.

<sup>89</sup> Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975), 394.

objectives of anti-porn activists were surprisingly consistent with those of Victorian-minded reactionaries, typically cast as the enemies of feminism.<sup>90</sup>

Thus, by the mid-1970s, what had initially been presented as a clear-cut issue between advocates of freedom and defenders of institutionalized repression had become a tangle of hypocritical positions and strange bedfellows. As certain liberals aligned themselves with conservative censors, others championed the popularization of porn despite the fact that even the Presidential Commission had found “no evidence” that explicit sexual materials affect actual behavior. Traditional political distinctions were thus growing more and more obscure. Writing in the late 1980s, Kendrick recognized that the supposedly clear dichotomy between Right and Left “has shown a disconcerting aptitude for reversing itself: exponents of freedom can demand the burning of books and pictures, while those who would preserve them can be labeled oppressors.” “The two sides are,” he concluded, “inseparable and deeply implicated in one another.”<sup>91</sup>

*Sailor’s Meat* embodies this realization. However, McCarthy’s own contribution to the debate is to not participate in it at all. Instead, he fundamentally shifts its focus to the very terms and categories themselves, along with the arguments that take them as givens. At a moment when pornography was being recast by proponents or adversaries to fit their respective agendas, McCarthy renders obvious the artificiality and instability of doing so. Shifting the focus from repression, suppression and oppression to the more

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<sup>90</sup> Kendrick, 231-33. The movement culminated around 1983, with a series of attempts to legislate the suppression of pornography. The legal strategy was to present porn as violation of women’s civil rights. Its unmitigated failure was, as Kendrick points out, ensured by over a century of similar efforts, effective only in showing that any such laws are bound to be ineffectual.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

fundamental processes of classification, *Sailor's Meat* anticipates Kendrick's contention that "'pornography' names an argument, not a thing."<sup>92</sup>

What became abundantly clear in the decade or so between McCarthy's video and Kendrick's study was that the moral "revolution" prophesized by all sides had, in fact, failed to materialize—that taboos and the basic categories on which they rely were as entrenched as ever. Proof of this came in the form of another official porn investigation, this time by the United States Attorney General, resulting in a "Final Report," released in 1986. As Kendrick put it a year later, this account "seemed designed to obliterate the 1970 *Report*—indeed, the entire twentieth century—and return the United States to the days of Comstockery, though with a few up-to-date flourishes that camouflaged the atavism."<sup>93</sup> It epitomized a mid-1980s moment, in which previous increases in sexual permissiveness, reflected in the wider acceptance of pornography, were seen as ushering in a unremitting cultural decline.<sup>94</sup> Regardless of its failure to establish any definitive connection between pornography and behavior, the document presented that connection as assumed and inescapable. It indicated a willful and egregious "retardation of pornographic discourse."<sup>95</sup>

Eighties neoconservatives were, however, not the only ones peddling such outdated views. In another alignment of supposed adversaries, the porn industry itself

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<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 234

<sup>94</sup> Linda S. Kauffman, *Bad Girls and Sick Boys: Fantasies in Contemporary Art and Culture* (Berkeley, CA: U. of California Press, 1998), 258.

<sup>95</sup> Kendrick, 222-34.

actively encouraged its own set of falsehoods. As Kendrick documented, the extensive reexamination of pornography in the late sixties and early seventies had ushered in a new period in its history—a “post-pornographic” era.<sup>96</sup> It was then that the pornotopian fantasy was exposed as a myth, its supposed subversiveness neutered. Thrust into the mainstream, pornography was no longer really “pornographic.” The category had lost its function, a fact reflected by McCarthy’s video. Yet, the standards of the genre never really faltered. The acknowledgement of pornography’s conventionality seemed to have no concrete effect on its implicit claims to deviancy.

This phenomenon was most succinctly articulated at the time by the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk. In *Critique of Cynical Reason* (1983), he pointed out that, while pornography had long ago exhausted its aggressive bite, the industry continues to flourish by labeling something “dirty” that it knows no longer is. As a result of this fundamentally cynical enterprise, contemporary pornography operates “with a high degree of consciousness toward artful stupefactions.” “For a long time now,” Sloterdijk concludes,

there has not been in late-bourgeois pornography any spark of a personal reckoning with inhibitions, erotic idealisms, and sensual taboos. Rather, it consciously produces backward consciousness by citing, with a wink, taboos ‘as if,’ in order to break through them with a false gesture of enlightenment.”<sup>97</sup>

The essential contradiction here is the continued presence of “pornography” in a post-pornographic world.

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 209.

<sup>97</sup> Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Edred (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 264-5.

This new post-porn perspective—already suggested in the mid-1970s by McCarthy’s *Sailor’s Meat*—informs a number of 1980s and 90s works by Kelley and Pettibon. In keeping with their more general disenchantment with idealized sexuality, these works specifically address the reductive thinking exemplified by pornography and the arguments surrounding it. Kelley’s *Missing Time Color Exercise* series (1998) (fig. 56), for example, is constructed from late-sixties and early-seventies *Sex to Sixty* magazines. This vulgar comic book offered half-witted cartoons as its cover art—the visual equivalents of bathroom-stall sex jokes. Kelley arranged these covers chronologically into grids, with colored rectangles standing in for missing issues from his incomplete collection.<sup>98</sup>

Part of his focus on repressed memory and popular manifestations of armchair psychology, this series was specifically conceived in relation to Kelley’s own childhood experience. As he recalls:

In the late Sixties, a letter was sent to the editor of my hometown newspaper: A local woman complained that pornography was for sale at the local liquor store. And what was worse, this pornography was disguised as a comic book...The title of the magazine was Sex to Sixty.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Mike Kelley, “Black Nostalgia,” interview with Daniel Kothenschulte, in *Mike Kelley – Two Projects: “Sublevel: Dim Recollection Illuminated by Multicolored Swamp Gas” and “Deodorized Central Mass with Satellites”* (Cologne: Kunstverein Braunschweig, 1999), 52.

<sup>99</sup> Mike Kelley, “Sublevel: Dim Recollection Illuminated by Multicolored Swamp Gas,” in *Mike Kelley – Two Projects: “Sublevel: Dim Recollection Illuminated by Multicolored Swamp Gas” and “Deodorized Central Mass with Satellites”* (Cologne: Kunstverein Braunschweig, 1999), 13.

However, along with the various personal associations the magazine carries for Kelley—it was, he claims, “one of the first pieces of erotica I ever saw”<sup>100</sup>—these works have much broader cultural implications. *Sex to Sexy* was, in fact, a product of pornography’s shift to the mainstream in the late 1960s and early 70s. Yet, as Kelley points out, this “bible of hick erotica,”<sup>101</sup>

could hardly be described as pornographic. It didn’t even have photography in it. I would say, rather, it was raunchy in a very juvenile way... Playboy cartoons, in contrast, seemed sophisticated.<sup>102</sup>

*Sex to Sexy* is thus extremely crude, even by the standards of the day. It is filled with simplifications—both formally and conceptually—of smut conventions that are themselves reductive to begin with. Drained of any real piquancy, the magazine is a prime example of truly un-pornographic pornography.

By setting this comic within a gridded framework, Kelley’s *Missing Time Color Exercise* draws a parallel between the reductivism of popular erotica and that of modernist art. Indeed, the magazine covers are here reconceived in formalist terms, used as components in an abstract “color exercise.” As Kelley explains, the monochrome panels interspersed throughout the composition were carefully designed “to match particular colors present in the magazine covers, or to represent colors intermediate between those found in surrounding issues.”<sup>103</sup> The result is a conflation of two supposed

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<sup>100</sup> Kelley, “Black Nostalgia,” 52.

<sup>101</sup> Kelley, “Sublevel,” 13.

<sup>102</sup> Kelley, “Black Nostalgia,” 52.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

opposites—the formal purity of “high” abstractionism and the cartoonish aesthetic of “low” sex humor.

Kelley has long been interested in this relationship. His 1989 essay, “Foul Perfection: Thoughts on Caricature,” draws attention to the similarities of caricature and classicism. Extrapolating the ideas of Ernst Kris and Albert Boime, Kelley points out that both are based on a kind of formal idealism that seeks to reduce a subject to its core essence. This also applies to abstractionism, from Mondrian and Malevich to Color Field painting and Minimalism. Kelley explains that the formal Platonism at the heart of such work is, in fact, the product of the same early modernist forces responsible for the categories of caricature, the grotesque and pornography. Referencing Kendrick’s then-recent study, Kelley laments the ghettoization of this unholy trinity into marginal realms distinct from “pure” Vitruvian abstraction. This reached its apogee in the dictums of the high modernist theoretician Adolf Loos, whose “Ornament and Crime” (1908) heralded what Kelley calls an “aesthetics of morality.” Loos’s admonition against “ornament”—under which all three lowly genres can, in a sense, be said to belong—rests upon a Puritan ethic. As Kelley indicates, this ethic is founded on the attempt to finally eliminate the erotic—seen as a repugnant residue of “primitive” culture, present in all impure imagery—from everyday life.<sup>104</sup> “To see beauty only in form,” Loos claims, “is the aim toward which the whole of mankind is tending.”<sup>105</sup>

In contrast, the *Sex to Sixty* covers incorporate all three “criminal” domains—caricature, the grotesque and pornography. By presenting them as components of

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<sup>104</sup> Mike Kelley, “Foul Perfection” (1989), reprinted in *Foul Perfection*, 23-26.

<sup>105</sup> Adolf Loos, quoted in Kelley, *Ibid.*, 24.

austere, geometric abstractions, Kelley soils the integrity of the convention. From afar, the grids appear as a set of generic modernist arrangements; close up, they are paradoxical. The viewer is stuck between readings, unable to categorize their hybrid compositions. Weaving diametrical opposites together, Kelley draws attention to the limitations of purist approaches to art making. In “Foul Perfection,” he recognizes a similar effect as part of a new artistic strategy actually based in caricature:

Much contemporary artwork is made and interpreted with reference to the issues—and history—of reductionist practice, especially minimalism. But the low-art/high-art distinction has become cloudy in some of this work, for the incorporation of caricature is no longer the leading strategy as the work actually *becomes* caricature. The historical referencing of reductivist paradigms here is only a legitimizing façade, concealing what is, in effect, a secret caricature—an image of low intent masquerading in heroic garb.<sup>106</sup>

Kelley’s own *Missing Time Color Exercise* also exemplifies this strategy. Its arrangements are likewise images “of low intent masquerading in heroic garb,” meant to sully Loos-ian morality and thus expose the restrictiveness of artistic purity. “A fouled primal form,” Kelley explains, “is a caricature of the very notion of perfection.”<sup>107</sup>

The result is not only an attack on modernism, but on the utopian fantasies at the root of artistic ideology. As Kelley points out, “one of the big lies of Modernism is that certain changes in aesthetics would change culture completely, forever.”<sup>108</sup> In the case of *Missing Time*, however, the critique is doubled. An assault on the high and the low, the series caricatures both formalist and sexual essentialism. While the alignment of

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>108</sup> Mike Kelley, “Dirty Toys: Mike Kelley Interviewed,” interview with Ralph Rugoff (1991), reprinted in *Mike Kelley*, ed. Thomas Kellein (Basel: Edition Cantz, 1992), 89.

pornography and modernist abstraction taints the artistic idealism of the former, it also dulls the edge of the latter. The color chart format counteracts the magazine's pornographic content. Aligned with the stylistic decorum of modernism, any remnant of transgressive vulgarity in the *Sex to Sixty* cartoons is defused. In fact, the only violation perpetrated here is Kelley's deliberately heavy-handed social faux-pas—his combination of realms meant to be kept apart—which points to the ineptitude of both art and pornography as agents of political and cultural transformation. Both are the embodiments of obsolete utopianisms, neutralized and thus able to be freely interchanged, to be used and abused at will.

The issue of social activism based in “pornotopian” fantasy is also central to Kelley's 1999 series of sexual stand-in sculptures. In a lengthy text printed on a poster accompanying the exhibition of this work, he explains his motivation: “it's time we, as a people, tossed aside our nation's puritan heritage... Being a healthy and productive member of society can only be possible if one is a satisfied, sexually functioning member of society.” The liberal-minded logic of this statement—its linking of social and sexual health—is, however, immediately convoluted by Kelley's suggested remedy. “Prostitution should not only be decriminalized,” he proposes, “it should be socialized and made available, at no cost, to every man, woman and child.” As the manifesto continues, its social program grows increasingly more ridiculous, yet always couched in sincere and legitimate cultural critiques. “We are a population so sex-starved,” he explains, “we have created for ourselves a popular culture industry that bombards us continually with a pantheon of fantasy figures of desire.” Along with porn stars, these include athletes, television and movie actors, rock stars and super models—all of which

serve as “the object of our masturbatory dreams,” but which, in the end, “provide only frustration.” As an antidote, Kelley suggests that these celebrities be required by law to make their bodies accessible to all who crave them. This, he assures us, would only be temporary measure, for once everyone is capable of satisfying their desires, “a ritualized arena of spectacular fantasy figures will serve no cultural purpose.”<sup>109</sup> Though blatantly absurd, Kelley’s decree implicates less extreme social programs that likewise present widespread sexual propagation as a solution to sexual repression.

The core issue here is the forced alignment of fantasy and reality—the crude belief that the superficial satisfaction of the former can fundamentally transform the latter—also central to the works of art the poster introduces. Acknowledging that his proposed social program may take a while to institute, Kelley offers his series of “celebrity surrogates” to satisfy present needs. These works, including *Composite Femme Fatale*, *Chocolate Lump*, *'69 Action Heroes*, and *Odd Man Out* (all 1998), consist of pillows, blankets, socks and other clothing laid out into humanoid forms. Their “heads” sport famous faces cut from the movie posters that hang on the walls around them. Looped sound-bites from these films play from speakers that accompany each arrangement. In *'69 Action Heroes* (1998) (fig. 57), for example, one hears the grunting of Dolph Lundgren (star of *Men of War*) paired with the heavy breathing of Jean-Claude Van Damme (star of *Sudden Death*).<sup>110</sup> Meanwhile, their cuddly substitutes lie head-to-

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<sup>109</sup> Mike Kelley, “A Stopgap Measure,” poster produced for exhibition at Patrick Painter Gallery, Los Angeles, 1999, reprinted in *Mike Kelley* (Phaidon), 142.

<sup>110</sup> Mike Kelley, “What Makes the Worm Growl,” interview with Dave Shulman, *LA Weekly* (January 22-28, 1999), reprinted: <http://www.laweekly.com/ink/printme.php?eid=3616>.

toe, sixty-nining. With genitals and orifices exposed, these figures are, according to Kelley, to be used as “springboards” to sexual liberation.<sup>111</sup> Tools for the management of unruly sexual desires, they are allegedly based on the belief that through empathetic fantasy, one can safely sublimate urges that would otherwise be socially disruptive. In fact, the same rationale prescribes pornography as a solution to sexual repression and a catalyst for Marcus’s “revolution in sensibility, manners, and attitudes”—a rationale echoed throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s by both the approbations of the Left and the admonitions of the Right. Yet, Kelley’s mounds of inanimate materials are deliberately inept at satisfying their intended purposes. Pathetically pornographic, they highlight the futility of policies meant to improve society through sexual surrogacy.

This effect is underscored by the verso to Kelley’s poster-proclamation, which features quotations from newspaper articles about a stalker of famed Hollywood director Steven Spielberg.<sup>112</sup> The described rape fantasies that motivated Jonathan F. Norman’s criminal obsession with Spielberg constitute an effective foil to Kelley’s social program. The nefarious incident exemplifies the unintended consequences that invariably bedevil the implementation of such idealistic schemes. Though Norman’s pathological preoccupation legitimizes the reasoning behind Kelley’s proposal, evincing the problem with a media system that generates sexual desire only to frustrate it, it also emphasizes the hazards of actually making celebrities available to the sexual cravings of their fans. With its Reichian premise on one side and real-world counterpart to that premise on the

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<sup>111</sup> Kelley, “A Stopgap Measure,” 142.

<sup>112</sup> For a complete transcription of this compilation of articles, see “Meet John Doe,” in *Minor Histories*, 300-309.

other, the poster employs the same strategy as that of Kelley's *Pay for Your Pleasure*. Forcing a clash of fantasy and reality, theory and practice, it exposes the treacherous potential of equating one with the other. Revealing the impracticality of solutions based on that equation, the work suggests not only that the liberation of sexual desire is unlikely to achieve its intended effects, but that the complete abandonment of sexual conventions may in fact be dangerous, as evidenced by the violent plans of Spielberg's stalker. The works and their accompanying poster stand in opposition to the sanctioning of sexual transgression as a wholly positive social force.

A similar point was articulated around this time by Michael André Bernstein in *Bitter Carnival: Ressentiment and the Abject Hero* (1992). Arguing against traditional political distinctions, Bernstein contends that "it is the rhetoric of revolutionary apocalypse indulged in by a large contingent of Western academics and intellectuals that is the truly conventional gesture." Examining various literary manifestations of romanticized deviance, he unearths a deep, dark secret of "liberal" thought—the recognition that sexual self-restraint is necessary for a habitable society to exist. For Bernstein, however, this realization fuels what is essentially a reactionary polemic against the attempted subversion of normative standards, which he sees as leading to an incorrigible state of moral relativism. The liberation of desire would, he claims, unleash "a disastrous torrent in which little except a kind of numb brutality could survive."<sup>113</sup> Kelley also acknowledges the impracticality of indiscriminate liberation, yet rejects the type of position-taking represented by Bernstein's diatribe. He refuses to implicate

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<sup>113</sup> Michael André Bernstein, *Bitter Carnival: Ressentiment and the Abject Hero* (Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 1992), 182-83.

anything except the simplistic thinking that leads to either the wholesale condemnation or the blind endorsement of deviance. Instead, he exposes the problems of both sides of the debate—the arbitrariness of social conventions on the one hand, and the danger of the loss of such conventions on the other.

The question of sexual transgression as inherently constructive is also a major theme in Pettibon's work. However, whereas Kelley obliquely alludes to the historical root of the issue, Pettibon directly implicates it. As mentioned, he characterizes the late 1960s and early 1970s as a moment of realization, a time when the internal contradictions of both idealized deviance and its conservative reaction became so obvious that they could no longer be sincerely maintained. Pettibon amplifies these contradictions, disclosing the unconsidered violent potential of sexual liberalism, while caricaturing the alarmist response to it—the “disastrous torrent...of numb brutality” that Bernstein warns against. In a drawing from *Tripping Corpse Eleven* (1988) (fig. 58), for example, the legs of a butchered body stick out from under the bed of a smiling hippie, who brags, “I’VE HAD SEX 12 TIMES THIS MONTH.” On the wall behind him, “Love, Sex, Death” and “ARMLESS LOVE” are scrawled in blood. The former refers to LSD—the countercultural hallucinogen of choice—its initials reconfigured from an agent of utopian consciousness to a slogan of dystopian violence. The latter phrase reiterates this transformation by punning on the assumption that love is harmless, which here it clearly is not.

Pettibon again transforms the hippie—symbol of countercultural resistance, of social deviance as political movement—into a self-indulgent, homicidal villain. These grizzly long-hairs are thus also generic versions of Charles Manson, infamous cult leader,

mass murderer, and preeminent icon of the end of sixties idealism. Embodying the problems with overly-romantic views of deviance—sexual and otherwise—Manson here becomes the poster-boy for the catastrophic potential of those views. Bernstein sees Manson as a direct result of such idealizations in literature, which he blames for providing models for the murderer to imitate.<sup>114</sup> The “abject heroes” that populate the work of authors such as Denis Diderot, Fyodor Dostoevsky and Louis-Ferdinand Céline have led, according to Bernstein, to the glorification of amorality in contemporary society, which in turn inspires the atrocities of the criminal. Pettibon, like Kelley, shies away from this kind of crude indictment. Where Bernstein draws a causal relationship between deviance in theory and deviance in practice—between art and life—Pettibon renounces that equivalence. He focuses instead on the underlying cultural values rendered problematic by Manson’s very existence. In a sense, Pettibon shifts the focus from the killer and his motives to us and ours.

In an untitled drawing from 1987 (fig. 59), another fierce Manson glares out from the page. Among vague references to and feeble defenses of the murders is a blunt tag-line purporting to be the voice of the madman himself: “THEY WOULD RATHER I SLAUGHTERED THEIR DAUGHTERS THAN MADE LOVE TO THEM.” The “they” presumably includes those who would defend basic social standards against Manson’s abominations. The statement’s pronouns distinguish between two camps—the condemners and the condemned—and viewers instinctively align themselves with one or the other (presumably the former). Divisions between liberals and conservatives effectively dissolve here, as both would surely denounce these crimes. Yet, while the

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 171-72.

choice may be easy, the result is not. Manson's accusation is particularly acerbic not because it questions one's verdict, but because it proposes a hidden impulse behind it, complicating what would seem to be a clear-cut judgment founded upon simple notions of good and evil. It suggests that sex—or better yet, love—was his real crime. Indeed, much has been made of Manson's use of sex as a weapon of psychological control over his followers. His infamy is a result not only of the killings, but of his discomfiting conflation of love and death. His extreme vilification is intertwined with the myth of sex as the ultimate transgression—worse than murder itself. Pettibon's Manson cunningly verbalizes this point, thus implicating society's priorities along with his own. He says it more succinctly in the untitled 1986 drawing mentioned in the introduction: "I AM YOUR REFLECTION, NOT YOUR OPPOSITE."

Pettibon's revisiting of these subjects reflects a general, mid-eighties reevaluation of sexuality by both the Left and the Right—a phenomenon foretold by McCarthy's early videos and to which Kelley's later work also responds. It was a cultural context characterized not only by the "Final Report" and debates over pornography, but by AIDS, gay activism and censorship of the arts. All contributed to a complex, and often contradictory, state of affairs in which traditional political alignments were thrown into question. Neocons openly ridiculed—and sought to reverse—what seemed to them like sexual relativism, considered as much a product of the sixties as its moral counterpart. Allan Bloom articulated this position in *The Closing of the American Mind*, in which he blamed the counterculture for the advent of "passionless" love, "reproduction without family," the end of modesty, and the general loss of a center from which to make judgments about sexuality. Meanwhile, as has been shown, even liberals had to

acknowledge the naïveté of the era. At the end of the day, both sides could agree with Bloom's conclusion that, when it came to sexual liberation, "the lion roaring behind the door of the closet turned out, when the door was opened, to be a little, domesticated cat."<sup>115</sup>

The casualties of the critiques offered by Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon are not limited, however, to the romanticization of sexuality. As shown, they also implicate the recasting of sex as a potently transgressive force. Both phenomena take the primacy of repression as a given, assuming that it is the principal (unnatural) instrument of compulsory conformity and institutionalized control. Sex as inherently good and sex as inherently deviant thus form two sides of an archaic coin that served as the social and political currency of the sexual revolution. Whether it be Brown's plea for "polymorphously perverse" bodies, Dworkin's cunnilingus campaign, nudity on stage, erotica novels, mainstream pornography, polygamy, or other taboo-busting efforts to make love instead of war, the open violation of sexual restrictions was dubiously deemed a catalyst for radical cultural and political change.

Alongside their contaminations of sexual ideals, Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon disrupt this concept of sexual dissent. Their work embodies the Foucaultian idea that transgression is actually part and parcel of the system it attempts to resist, that "liberation" is itself a form of submission. These artists present deviance as an unfixed category, wholly dependent on culturally specific, mutually sustaining dichotomies between good and bad behavior. Once dislodged, claims for effective resistance through deviancy become moot; the term simply becomes a questionable counter-value to the

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<sup>115</sup> Bloom, 99-108.

equally suspect idea of sexual normalcy. Moreover, Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon expose the naïveté and impracticality of a strategy that posits deviance as a wholly positive force, as a productive agent of revolution. As in their treatment of naturalized sex, these artists highlight conveniently overlooked problems with this strategy, showing it to be significantly knottier than its proponents would like.

In a Pettibon drawing from 1982 (fig. 60), a naked hippie stands with his thumb extended, hitchhiking. “(Leaving commune) I came for love and understanding,” he explains, “but got suspicious stares and (sigh) chores instead.” With his characteristically sardonic wit, Pettibon’s caption at the bottom returns us back to that crucial threshold—the point of no return also alluded to by that knife-wielding hippie from the cover of *Tripping Corpse Four*. “April 1968,” it explains, “after people had stopped loving each other as much as they did in 1967.” Acknowledging the capriciousness of a movement that intended to transform society through sexual liberation, the work again locates a transitional moment—the point at which romanticism fizzled and disenchantment set in. This sentiment is echoed by a later drawing from *Pettibon with Strings* (1988) (fig. 61), a zine populated by sexual malcontents. Here, a tied-up woman uses her teeth to pull a blindfold off a similarly bound man. The suggestion of real sadomasochism is belied, however, by the dead-pan text: “SEXUAL FREEDOM GOT US NUDE PARTIES.” The protagonists are thus differentiated from the despoiled virgins, cheating spouses, blackmailers and abusive foster-fathers who inhabit the rest of the zine. Instead of sexual victims, the figures are willing participants in some harmless kinky party game. Such benign amusement, the drawing implies, wound up being the only tangible upshot of sexual liberation. As with Pettibon’s other sex-related works and those of Kelley and

McCarthy, this image embodies a definitively post-sixties perspective, one which recognizes that the counterculture was neutered by the rigid terms of its own propositions. The so-called sexual revolution was, it seems, not so revolutionary after all.

## CHAPTER THREE

### BENDING GENDER

In a scene from Pettibon's 1983 zine, *Capricious Missives* (fig. 62), a dejected son sits slumped on his parents' living room sofa.

I just couldn't take another day of it, mother. I just...don't have what it takes to follow in father's footsteps. The other policemen made fun of me because no matter how hard I tried I couldn't grow a little moustache like they all have. They made jokes that I was a homosexual, mother, that I was less than a man. I had to quit.

Looking down at him, his mother sobs uncontrollably into her handkerchief. Evidently, it is she who is most devastated, her despair less a product of her boy's professional setback than of his inability to live up to his father's manliness. And apparently this inadequacy is one of appearance, rather than achievement. To be a real man, the work suggests, is to properly don the uniform of masculinity, to display prescribed signs of machismo.

It is a common Pettibon motif. A page from *The Pleasure-Giving Arts* (1990) (fig. 63), for example, similarly highlights the pressure to adopt a preordained gender role and the humiliation that comes from the failure to do so. With a knife in hand, a teenage son tells his overbearing dad that he has quit the football team. "WHAT?!", the father responds, "WHEN YOU QUIT THE TEAM YOU QUIT THIS FAMILY AND THIS COUNTRY." As in the earlier drawing, the work dramatizes the maintenance of a preset masculine identity, handed down from fathers to sons and reinforced through fraternal

relations. Pettibon caricatures this cycle of social conditioning, presenting it as traumatic and perverse, yet also as the very basis of patriarchal culture—the foundation of both family and country. As implied by these works, however, that foundation is constructed according to standards that are tenuous, even if entrenched. Indeed, the precariousness of such standards may be the reason they are defended so vigorously by those most invested in them. To Pettibon, society's measures of masculinity are not only restrictive, but arbitrary and vacuous. Thus, his ashamed adolescent is unmanly merely because he does not want to play football. In the case of the policeman's son, it is simply a matter of facial hair.

Both Kelley and McCarthy also target the formation and perpetuation of masculine identity. As discussed in chapter two, McCarthy's automaton sculptures *Cultural Gothic* and *The Garden* parody the rites of passage by which patriarchy is handed down from generation to generation. Kelley and McCarthy's collaborative video, *Family Tyranny*, similarly features a father-son duo engaged in painful and demented rituals of paternal inculcation. "My daddy did this to me," McCarthy's character tells the boy Kelley, "you can do this to your son." Masculinity, these works contend, is not innate, but learned. It is the product of systematic and forceful indoctrination. Whereas McCarthy satirizes this process—staging, in his words, "overloaded clichés of male power"<sup>1</sup>—Kelley's line-up of losers and misfits embody its breakdown. Like Pettibon's wimps, they are deflated, falling far short of society's marks of manhood. As its title suggests, Kelley's sprawling "Half a Man" series revolves around this idea of

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<sup>1</sup> Paul McCarthy, quoted in "California Über Alles," by Rachel Harrison, *Artforum* XLIV, no. 1 (Sept 2005): 70.

inadequacy. As mentioned in the introduction, not only is the lowly Trash Picker impotent, but the craft form of Kelley's banners is itself provocatively emasculative as well. Cut and glued felt is hardly a macho material.

These artists are, of course, not the first to focus on gender. Yet, by concentrating on masculinity in and of itself, Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon break new ground. The subject distinguishes them from feminism proper, positioning their work both in relation to and in confrontation with that movement. Meanwhile, they offer rejoinders to the reactionary sexual politics of the early 1980s. Along with other attempts at retrenchment, the recuperation of traditional gender values was hailed as a remedy for a host of pressing social problems—from AIDS to teenage pregnancy to drug addiction—justifying a retreat from the progressive legislations and social advances of previous decades. The women's movement was an especially prominent target, seen as responsible for disrupting the "natural" roles and structure of the family unit—America's celebrated moral anchor.<sup>2</sup> This fueled the rollbacks and rallying cries of the Reagan Right, for whom the Gipper was a tough, two-fisted paragon of masculinity.<sup>3</sup>

Such concerns also infiltrated eighties popular culture, which, in seeming contrast to the rise of the Right, witnessed a prominent upsurge of gender bending. Most often, however, this cross-dressing functioned as a shroud for conservatism. The 1982 blockbuster *Tootsie*, for example, features a protagonist who dresses as a woman in order to land a part on a television soap opera. Americans took very seriously the questions

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<sup>2</sup> The final rejection of the Equal Rights Amendment in 1982 can be seen as a culmination of this viewpoint.

<sup>3</sup> For an analysis of the myth of Reagan as archetype of male power, see Combs, *The Reagan Range*, 48-56.

about gender raised by the film, often crediting it with increasing consciousness and fostering a deeper understanding between the sexes.<sup>4</sup> Yet, as Elaine Showalter points out in “Critical Cross-Dressing: Male Feminists and the Woman of the Year” (1983), while *Tootsie* appears to subvert traditional roles, it actually retains stereotypical characterizations of masculinity and femininity—the former connoting strength, confidence and self-respect; the latter, sensitivity and emotionalism.<sup>5</sup> And it is the man who remains in control throughout, becoming the catalyst for personal and social well being and thus the harbinger of the movie’s moral. Ultimately, as Showalter explains, *Tootsie* promotes masculine power under the guise of feminist liberation; men, it seems, make better women than women do.<sup>6</sup> Similar lessons could be culled from a host of contemporaneous cross-dressing films and plays—*Cloud 9* (1979), *The World According to Garp* (1982), *Victor/Victoria* (1982), and *La Cage Aux Folles* (1983), to name just a few. Like the antifeminist platform of the Right, all were symptomatic of the distinctly male gender anxieties of the time.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> And critics generally agreed. Molly Haskell, for example, referred to Hoffman’s Dorothy as “the first genuinely mainstream feminist heroine of our era” (quoted in “Critical Cross-Dressing: Male Feminists and the Woman of the Year” (1983), by Elaine Showalter, *Men in Feminism*, ed. Alice Jardine and Paul Smith [New York and London: Methuen, Inc., 1987], 121).

<sup>5</sup> Showalter, 123.

<sup>6</sup> Annette Kuhn argues that such popular manifestations of transvestitism typically assert this notion—that men in fact make better women than women (Annette Kuhn, *The Power of the Images: Essays on Representation and Sexuality* [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985], 73).

<sup>7</sup> Showalter, 120; Showalter also quotes Lewis Lapham in a New York Times op-ed against the admission of women to the Century Club of Manhattan: “The clarity of gender makes possible human dialectic. Let the lines of balanced tension go slack and the structure dissolves into the ooze of androgyny and narcissism” (Ibid., 121).

These anxieties also fueled the so called “men’s movement” that blossomed in the mid-1980s. On the whole, its participants responded to a perceived crisis in masculine identity, a reaction to the widespread recognition of feminism as a significant cultural phenomenon with very real social bearing. Men were called upon to redefine their own potentials, just as women did during the previous two decades. This took the form of new self-help books such as *Men Freeing Men* (1985), “a guidepost to men just staring out on the journey of masculine liberation,”<sup>8</sup> along with men’s rights lobbying groups such as the National Coalition of Free Men and various state-affiliated Men’s Gathering clubs sponsoring male-bonding retreats. At their best, such entities sought to help an unsure population negotiate the new roles expected of it by a more egalitarian society. Though they retained overly rigid distinctions between the sexes, advocating from what was largely an us-versus-them platform, they did attempt to overcome restrictions—emotional, psychological, and social—imposed on men by Western cultural norms and standards. Men were encouraged to get in touch with themselves and to get involved in realms traditionally designated for women—childrearing, most notably. At their worst, and unfortunately most common, they cast men as the victims of a reverse-sexism perpetrated by an oppressive women’s movement and called for a reification of traditional values as a way to resist what were seen as feminist conspiracies against them. This latter version saw feminism and multiculturalism as having afforded a privileged

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<sup>8</sup> Francis Baumli, preface to *Men Freeing Men: Exploding the Myth of the Traditional Male*, ed. Francis Baumli (Jersey City: New Atlantis Press, 1985), n.p.

status to women and minorities. The shibboleths of self-improvement and equal rights were used to mask a vehemently reactionary agenda.<sup>9</sup>

The essential problem, which came to a head in the 1980s, was that in the wake of 1970s feminism, men were confronted with a dearth of clear-cut role models. This inspired the reactionary cultural politics that sought simply to “solve” the dilemma either by returning to pre-feminist paradigms or by spotlighting a new and improved male, liberated from decades of attempts to “feminize” him—what *Esquire* magazine has called the “Post-sensitive Man.”<sup>10</sup> Yet, for men enlightened by feminism’s exposure of patriarchal dominance, the situation presented a more complex predicament, partly because feminism itself never sufficiently addressed the possibility of a truly reformed masculinity. In a 1998 essay titled “Can Men Be Subjects of Feminist Thought?”, Sandra Harding recalls that the feminism of the 1960s and 70s saw feminist men as a contradiction in terms:

Here all men appear deeply and firmly implicated in women’s oppression because they receive the benefits of male supremacist culture, its institutions and practices, whether or not they actively or consciously engage in sexist acts or the construction of androcentric conceptual frameworks.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> This agenda can also be understood as the basis for a flurry of contemporaneous movies, in which men “rediscover” themselves. As Linda S. Kauffman points out, these films—such as *Fatal Attraction* (1987), *Ghost* (1990), *Pacific Heights* (1990), *Bonfire of the Vanities* (1990), *Unlawful Entry* (1992), *Regarding Henry* (1991), and *Wolf* (1994)—signal a longing for a time male and female roles were uncomplicated. They imply “that ‘real men’ have lost their roots,” and that “only by rediscovering these roots will they reclaim their manhood” (Kauffman, 118-19).

<sup>10</sup> Harry Stein, “The Post-Sensitive Man is Coming,” *Esquire*, May 1994, 5-6.

<sup>11</sup> Sandra Harding, “Can Men Be Subjects of Feminist Thought?” in *Men Doing Feminism*, ed. Tom Digby (New York and London: Routledge, 1998), 179.

According to this logic, the very existence of a patriarchal order inevitably makes all men both complicit and culpable. In “How Feminism Made a Man Out of Me: The Proper Subject of Feminism and the Problem of Men” (1998), Patrick D. Hopkins notes men’s frustrations with this situation, likening certain feminist positions on masculinity to conservative Christian teachings that suggest that because one is male he must act and think “masculine.” Similarly, he explains, feminism assumed that “masculinity was an inevitable possession and consequence of being male.” Hopkins points out that “in both cases the governing factor was an ideology of gender, a practice of gender, a set of compulsory gender performances, a set of gender inclusions and exclusions.”<sup>12</sup>

It is telling that such criticisms of feminist practice—and questions of whether men can even be subjects of feminist thought—were still necessary in the late 1990s. This budding assessment of feminism’s treatment of masculinity stands in marked contrast to the hesitancy of previous male writers to approach the subject from critical perspectives. Instead, feminist-inclined men of the 1980s were largely self-relegated to supporting roles. Paul Smith’s “Men in Feminism: Men and Feminist Theory” (1987) epitomizes this situation. According to Smith, it is men’s responsibility to determine how best to uphold feminism without committing the errors it teaches them to avoid. He promotes a blanket acceptance of feminism, seeing it as theoretically homogeneous and conclusively positive, and worries that progressive men might not be able to avoid “the continual likelihood of appearing provocative, offensive, and troublesome to the people

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<sup>12</sup> Patrick D. Hopkins, “How Feminism Made a Man Out of Me: The Proper Subject of Feminism and the Problem of Men,” in *Men Doing Feminism*, 41.

who have taught [them] to ask the questions.”<sup>13</sup> To Smith, this does not constitute a limitation of feminist thought. Instead, the onus is placed entirely on men not to offend. The timidity of Smith’s approach to gender analysis indicates this perceived need to be, in his words, “properly correct.”

This supposedly progressive approach thus dovetails with more conservative positions. Both respond to a general anxiety regarding appropriate male behavior and identity in the 1980s. In an essay titled “Male Trouble” (1995), Abigail Solomon-Godeau sees this anxiety, and the men’s movement it motivated, as the result of a schizophrenic division in popular culture, in which the über-masculine persona and his “feminized” male counterpart harmoniously coexist. Such an improbably convergence signals, in Solomon-Godeau’s words, a “destabilization of the notion of masculinity.”<sup>14</sup> An early-eighties film like *Tootsie* both embodies this crisis and attempts to assuage it by reaffirming masculinity through the celebration of the new and improved man—one based, again, on conventional conceptions of gender. By the late 1980s and 1990s, the

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<sup>13</sup> Paul Smith, “Men in Feminism: Men and Feminist Theory,” in *Men in Feminism*, 38

<sup>14</sup> Abigail Solomon-Godeau, “Male Trouble,” in *Constructing Masculinity*, ed. Maurice Berger, Brian Wallis and Simon Watson (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), 70. Thus, Solomon-Godeau identifies the coexistence of the rugged Marlborough Man on the one hand and an abundance of advertisements featuring seductive, passive young men on the other (e.g., the “languorous Versace boy” present in advertisements for the couture fashion designer). Her comparison could have also included the coexistence of ultra-macho action heroes, such as Sylvester Stallone’s John Rambo, with the popular daddy-fills-in-for-absent-mommy characters featured in movies such as *Mr. Mom* and sitcoms such as *Diff’rent Strokes*. Indeed, As James Combs points out, the Rambo character reflected the conservative context of America in the 1980s. “Rambo was,” Combs explains, “a thoughtless, sexless and vengeful killing machine, and image of a muscle-bound superpower whose spirit had been held captive by the betrayals of both government and our enemies. Once unleashed, he destroys both Vietnamese and Soviet foes with impunity” (Combs, 54).

problem of masculinity in American culture had established itself as a significant subject in its own right, independent of feminism. This was reflected by a surge in scholarship on the topic during that period, including a number of books on men's approach to feminism, such as *Men in Feminism* (1987)<sup>15</sup>, *Engendering Men: The Question of Male Feminist Criticism* (1990)<sup>16</sup>, and *Men Doing Feminism* (1998)<sup>17</sup>; along with a plethora of studies on masculinity itself, such as *The Making of Masculinities: The New Men's Studies* (1987)<sup>18</sup>, *Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity* (1990)<sup>19</sup>, and *Constructing Masculinity* (1995)<sup>20</sup>.

It is in relation to this cultural context that the gender issues at play in the work of Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon can be situated. For all three, gender—and especially masculinity—is a primary topic, though each addresses it in distinct ways. Commingling conceptions culled from an array of sources, their work disrupts contemporary approaches to gender by exposing the internal contradictions, double-standards and limitations of a wide range of perspectives. These artists offer gender reconfigurations

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<sup>15</sup> Alice Jardine and Paul Smith, eds., *Men in Feminism* (New York and London: Methuen, Inc., 1987).

<sup>16</sup> Joseph A. Boone and Michael Cadden, eds., *Engendering Men: The Question of Male Feminist Criticism* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>17</sup> Tom Digby, ed., *Men Doing Feminism* (New York and London: Routledge, 1998).

<sup>18</sup> Harry Brod, ed., *The Making of Masculinities: The New Men's Studies* (New York: Allen & Unwon, 1987).

<sup>19</sup> David D. Gilmore, *Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990).

<sup>20</sup> Maurice Berger, Brian Wallis and Simon Watson, eds., *Constructing Masculinity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995).

that are informed by the ideas of various precedents, but which refuse to adhere to any single theoretical position. They present grotesque combinations of femininity and masculinity that recast these categories as continuously mobile, culturally conditioned labels—labels which, like those affixed to sex, artificially confine notions of the natural and the normal.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon apply their strategy of entrapment to gender. Theirs is a decidedly different methodology than those who advance predetermined positions that reduce human behavior and experience to overly simplistic categories. As implicated in the work of all three artists, such positions, even when well-intended, often replace restrictive notions of gender with similarly problematic alternatives. By deliberately tangling rather than disentangling, Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon entwine a host of programmatic points of view, making already knotty issues even knottier. The multifarious messes that result enable them to violate gender norms from several directions simultaneously, while avoiding the pitfalls of their

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<sup>21</sup> The gender issues at play in the work of Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon have been touched upon by art critics, but never given the in depth treatment the topic deserves. Rugoff briefly mentions gender confusion in relation to McCarthy's early performances (Rugoff, "Mr. McCarthy's Neighborhood," 35). Amelia Jones offers probably the most extensive treatment of the theme, employing a psychoanalytic approach to show how McCarthy "works—through humor and buffoonery—to explore that which patriarchal culture represses in order to reverse the sublimatory effects of civilization" (Jones, "Paul McCarthy's Inside Out Body and the Desublimation of Masculinity," in *Paul McCarthy* [New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 2000], 127). Kelley's twisting of gender codes has been widely acknowledged, though again never thoroughly fleshed out. In her introduction to the catalogue for Kelley's 1993 retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art, Elizabeth Sussman identifies gender as one of the primary themes in the artist's oeuvre, yet none of the catalogue's thirteen essays deals with the subject (Sussman, *Mike Kelley*). The issue of gender is effectively nonexistent in the writing on Pettibon's work. There are virtually no critical examinations of his treatment of the subject.

predecessors—be they conservative or progressive. Their work thus encapsulates a moment of uncertainty, of increasingly convoluted conceptions of both femininity and masculinity. It also reflects these artists' own complicated status as American males negotiating a cultural atmosphere of ever more confusing gender consciousness.

Of course, the principle reference point for their focused assaults on gender is feminism itself, which itself underwent a profound reexamination during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Artists coming of age at this time were especially cognizant of feminist practice and theory, as feminists had made inroads in the gallery and museum worlds and were active teaching at art schools (though women were still grossly underrepresented in both arenas). Thus, Lucy Lippard could claim in 1980 that “by now most people—not just feminist people—will acknowledge that feminism has made a contribution to the avant-garde and/or modernist arts of the 1970s.”<sup>22</sup> Indeed, even anti-feminist commentators had to come to terms—if grudgingly—with the presence of feminist art, despite their belief that it was responsible for “lowering the artistic standards,”<sup>23</sup> as conservative critic Hilton Kramer put it.

In the 1980s, this growing prominence inevitably led to a broad reevaluation of the movement, the validity of its presumptions and the effectiveness of its methodologies. The most enduring issue was what is termed “essentialist” or “separatist” feminism. Generally, criticism has been leveled against feminists who, in resisting patriarchal bias, posit fixed notions of womanhood, assumed to be common to all women and

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<sup>22</sup> Lucy Lippard, “Sweeping Exchanges: The Contribution of Feminism in the Art of the 1970s” (1980), reprinted in *The Pink Glass Swan: Selected Essays on Feminist Art*, by Lucy Lippard (New York: The New Press, 1995), 171.

<sup>23</sup> Hilton Kramer, quoted in Lippard, “Sweeping Exchanges,” note 1, p. 171.

fundamentally distinct from those of manhood. These feminists base their positions on a singular—or “essential”—female nature. Due to its intrinsic dissimilarity to masculinity, this feminine essence is deemed irreconcilable with social rules formed on men’s terms and with men as their model. Consequently, women’s conformity to such rules can only arise through an unnatural, and inherently sexist, system of institutionalized coercion and obligatory abidance.

For feminists following this line of thought, foregrounding a coherent notion of femininity was seen as a path of resistance to patriarchal order. In terms of art, this typically manifested itself into an emphasis on “feminine” techniques, realms, imagery, and materials. The objective was either to expose the limitations of a masculine-oriented art system incompatible with truly feminine work, or to turn a collective back on that system by carving out new separate-but-equal spaces for female artists—hence, the “separatist” label. Both were in distinct contrast to the art world of the 1950s and 60s, in which, as Lippard points out, women “feared the adjective feminine,”<sup>24</sup> and “‘female techniques’ like sewing, weaving, knitting, ceramics, even the use of pastel colors (pink!) and delicate lines” were fervently avoided—even considered taboo—by women artists.<sup>25</sup> In the 1970s, by comparison, a new wave in women’s art emerged, “in which delicate touch, pale colors, and gyno-sensuous imagery are frankly associated with femaleness (by the artists themselves rather than by a patronizing reviewer deigning to cover ‘minor’

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<sup>24</sup> Lucy Lippard, “1975: Excerpts from the Catalogues of Three Women’s Exhibitions” (1975), reprinted in *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women’s Art*, by Lucy Lippard (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc, 1976), 50.

<sup>25</sup> Lucy Lippard, “Household Images in Art” (1973), reprinted in *From the Center*, 57.

art).”<sup>26</sup> Lippard sees such qualities as “unashamedly feminine,” addressing “the vulnerability of women’s lives.”<sup>27</sup>

Los Angeles was a hotbed for some of the most radical “gyno-centric” feminist art. In fact, L.A.-based artists Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro have been credited as the originators of this approach.<sup>28</sup> Both were instructors in the Feminist Art Program, which Chicago formed in 1970 at Fresno State College and then relocated to California Institute of the Arts in the fall of 1971. It was there that the two artist-teachers collaborated with various students on a large-scale collaboration called *Womanhouse* (1971) (fig. 64), a landmark in the history of feminist art.<sup>29</sup> These artists transformed an abandoned Hollywood mansion into a series of female-oriented environments, exploring a range of issues surrounding the domestic roles and identities traditionally assigned to middle-class women. In the words of Chicago and Schapiro:

The age-old female activity of homemaking was taken to fantasy proportions. *Womanhouse* became the repository of the daydreams women have as they wash, bake, cook, sew, clean and iron their lives away.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Lippard, “1975: Excerpts,” 50.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Lucy Lippard, “The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: European and American Women’s Body Art” (1976), reprinted in *From the Center*, 122-23.

<sup>29</sup> For a good synopsis of the Feminist Art Program, *Womanhouse* and their context and inception, see *By Our Own Hands: The Women Artist’s Movement, Southern California, 1970-1976*, by Faith Wilding (Santa Monica, CA: Double X, Inc., 1977).

<sup>30</sup> Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, from the introduction to the *Womanhouse* catalogue, quoted in Wilding, 25-26.

Indeed, *Womanhouse* was a festival of feminized forms. Ultimately, though, its energetic and whimsical mix of collective labor and flagrant insubordination, of biting humor and visceral repulsion, was channeled into a rigid and programmatic approach to art-making propagated by Chicago, Schapiro and their followers. Most notably, female body-based imagery was promoted as the lingua franca of women artists. In fact, Chicago and Schapiro specifically designated the parameters of a proper “female iconography,” which they insisted should present “a central orifice whose formal organization is often a metaphor for a woman’s body.”<sup>31</sup> Also prominent was the use of feminine craft materials, epitomized by Schapiro’s “femme” collages of embroidered fabrics and patterned tablecloths, curtains, and aprons. According to Chicago and Schapiro, by embracing craft and vaginal—or “central core”—imagery, the female artist “takes that mark of her otherness and...establishes a vehicle by which to state the truth and beauty of her identity.”<sup>32</sup>

It is this singular notion of “her identity”—recognizable, stable, and above all representable by the genitalia—that has subsequently been taken to task by critics, despite the defiance of the work produced. As participant Faith Wilding points out, “*Womanhouse* was a new kind of art-making which took private and collective female experiences as its subject matter.”<sup>33</sup> Yet, that subject matter is presented monolithically—as a preordained set of “female experiences” allegedly had by all

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<sup>31</sup> Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, “Female Imagery” (1973), reprinted in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), 40.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>33</sup> Wilding, 28.

women. This reduces womanhood to a simplistic, and often stereotypical, abstraction that is, in fact, hardly universal. The result is a conception of femininity that neutralizes its actual diversity, ignoring variables of class, race, ethnicity, culture, time and place. Such notions of gender rely on fixed categories of identity that effectively polarize the sexes into mutually exclusive camps, definitively classifying aspects of human experience as either “masculine” or “feminine.” This approach comes dangerously close to traditional gender schemas, against which feminism supposedly functions.

Some opposition to this approach existed from the beginning. In her 1972 *Feminist Art Journal* article, “A Feminine Sensibility?”, Pat Mainardi argues against the codification of “a so-called ‘female aesthetic’ which interprets art by women as having validity (being ‘truly female’) only insofar as it can be analyzed in terms of female anatomy.” The key issue is that the feminist emphasis on, for example, central-core imagery assumes an equivalence between biology and femininity, between sex and gender:

It is reactionary because it is going backwards into some form of biological determinism at a time when the most progressive women and men are fighting their way out of a repressive ideas that one’s humanity should be defined and limited by the location of one’s genitals.

Mainardi also laments the fact that such tactics close off feminism to forward-thinking men. As she points out, “since feminism is a political position...and feminist art reflects those politics, it could even be made by men.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Pat Mainardi, “A Feminine Sensibility?” (1972), reprinted in *Feminism-Art-Theory: An Anthology, 1968-2000*, ed. Hilary Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2001), 296.

Positions such as Mainardi's gained new currency in the 1980s, as supposedly more radical versions of feminism came increasingly under fire. The reproach of excessively rigid feminist ideologies pervaded poststructuralist gender theory. In their 1981 book, *Old Mistresses: Woman, Art and Ideology*, feminist art historians Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock criticize vaginal imagery as essentialist, regressive and potentially dangerous, since it can be "easily retrieved and co-opted by a male culture because [it does] not rupture radically meanings and connotations of women in art as body, as sexual, as nature, as object for male possession."<sup>35</sup> Emphasizing that "femininity" itself is a social construct," Judith Barry and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis offer similar criticisms in their 1980 article, "Textual Strategies: The Politics of Art-Making." They argue against feminist "aesthetics of simple inversion"—including both vaginal- and craft-based work—which "does not challenge a fixed and rigid category of 'femininity.'" In such work, they point out, "what is assumed to be a progressive position is actually retrograde."<sup>36</sup>

The crucial problem, addressed by all these critiques, is that despite its disruption of conventional femininity, essentialist feminism relied heavily upon immutable gender categories. Again, a strict masculine-feminine binary remained the theoretical lynchpin of their attacks on institutionalized sexism. What is less frequently noted, however, is that these approaches do not just conceive of a category of "woman" that is dubious in and of itself, but do so in relation to conceptions of masculinity that are equally

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<sup>35</sup> Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd. And Pantheon Books, 1981), 130.

<sup>36</sup> Judith Barry and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, "Textual Strategies: The Politics of Art Making" (1980), reprinted in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, 53-56.

problematic. The issue is fundamentally the same for both: the construction of gender as an a priori. Yet, it would take another decade for the problems of essentialist masculinity to be fully articulated.<sup>37</sup>

In advance of such a realization, the work of Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon actively contests the tendency to reduce masculinity to a fixed and distinguishable identity. The result is a disruption of the very structure of gender categories, which depend on a stable femininity *and* masculinity. As Roszika and Pollock point out:

We never speak of masculine art or man artist, we say simply art and artist. But the art of men can only maintain its dominance and privilege on the pages of art history by having a negative to its positive, a feminine to its unacknowledged masculine.<sup>38</sup>

Bringing this unacknowledged masculinity into play, Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon effectively undermine fundamental tenets of gender.

The fact that these three artists were working in Los Angeles is especially relevant. Not only was the significance of L.A. feminism becoming increasingly recognizable in the late 1970s and early 1980s, but in its wake, a number of male artists from the area began to attack restrictive gender categories. In an important historical record of the then-current Southern California art scene, *Performance Anthology* (1980), Lynda Frye Burnham documents such activities.<sup>39</sup> She notes the rise of sexual politics in

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<sup>37</sup> In 1990, for example, feminist theorist Judith Butler warns that “the effort to identify the enemy as singular in form is a reverse-discourse that uncritically mimics the strategy of the oppressor instead of offering a different set of terms” (Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* [New York and London: Routledge, 1990], 13).

<sup>38</sup> Roszika and Pollock, 80.

<sup>39</sup> Linda Frye Burnham, “Performance Art in Southern California: An Overview” in *Performance Anthology: Source Book for a Decade of California Performance Art*, ed.

the recent work of male artists such as Richard Newton, Paul Best, John Duncan, as well as McCarthy himself. According to Burnham, each addresses the social implications of femininity and masculinity, offering unique attacks on normative gender standards and conditioning.

Kelley has also acknowledged the legacy of L.A.-based feminism, noting that the play with gender roles and identities

reached its zenith in Judy Chicago's feminist workshop programs in the Los Angeles area in the 1970s. Here, female artists collectively explored their relationship to various female stereotypes in a much more critical and politically conscious environment than had previously been possible. Their performances used such stereotypes as the cheerleader, bride, waitress, beauty queen, and drag queen as a way of exploring and destabilizing female stereotypes.

Yet, he also sees problems with these artists' exclusive interest in "their own relationship to female stereotypes,"<sup>40</sup> at the expense of any acknowledgement of male counterparts.

To Kelley, these activists challenged preset roles for women, but neglected deeper issues of gender identity.

As he sees it, the reductivism in feminist thinking is an outgrowth of the 1960s counterculture, for the hippie movement was itself an "essentialist position," whose aesthetics were largely dependent on gender signification. At the core of this, Kelley points out, was a "profound empathetic connection to 'otherness' in general. But the greatest 'other' was woman. If America's problems were the result of being militaristic and patriarchal, the antidote would be the embrace of the prototypically feminine."<sup>41</sup>

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Carl E. Loeffler and Darlene Tong (San Francisco: Contemporary Arts Press, 1980), 390-438.

<sup>40</sup> Mike Kelley, "Cross-Gender/Cross-Genre," 110-11.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

This then became the impetus for various “displays of femininity”—pacifism, long hair, and flowery clothing—which came to constitute the hippie uniform.<sup>42</sup> A decade or so later, American punk simply inverted this formula. As Kelley notes, with punk “the gender significations of the previous avant-garde were reversed: maleness became the general referent.” He emphasizes that both “the punk ‘unisex’ image” and “the utopian, feminine androgyny of the psychedelic period” attempted to subvert social norms through a sort of gendered role-playing.<sup>43</sup> Yet, as discussed in chapter one, neither was able to fully translate their look into a viable political strategy.

By the end of the 1970s, a number of initially progressive approaches to gender were thus recognized as dead-end streets. Feminism had successfully prompted a heightened awareness of sexism, but its essentialist tendencies were increasingly falling under attack, from both reactionaries and those who critiqued its methodologies in its own name, while subcultural alternatives were exposed as impotent. In the meantime, chauvinistic conservatism was ushered in with Reagan and the freshly invigorated Right. For L.A.-based artists—and especially for progressive-minded men confronted with a series of defunct masculine identities—a re-examination of gender roles, and the significance of gender in American culture at large, was particularly vital.

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<sup>42</sup> It is also relevant to note that, for all its emphasis on sexual liberation, the 1960s counterculture celebration of natural processes such as birth and the “earth mother” adhered to conventional gender categories and female stereotypes. Likewise, “free love” itself adhered to traditional male-female roles, which generally tended to suit men more than women (Street, 181).

<sup>43</sup> Mike Kelley, “Cross-Gender/Cross-Genre,” 111.

For Pettibon, Kelley and McCarthy, the reconfiguration of gender roles, associations and types thus became the primary strategy for subverting overly reductive categories. The results are artworks composed of incongruous forms—hermaphroditized, androgynized, pumped up or neutered—which irrevocably complicate conventional gender categories. Stuck between readings and interpretations, viewers are forced to reckon with their own expectations, and the defunct classifications to which those expectations adhere. Ultimately, their work re-presents the “natural” as an artifice, positioning the hybrid—by definition, antithetical with conclusive categorization—as the only authentic condition. The only true gender is, in fact, no gender at all.

### **Caught in the Zipper**

A drawing from Pettibon’s *Lana* (1984) (fig. 65), features a middle aged woman glaring out, a venomous expression on her face. The accompanying words are those of her apologetic lover:

I CAME TOO FAST.

Clearly she’s not happy about it. And, as the object of the woman’s scornful and unforgiving gaze, the unexpectant viewer is cast as the perpetrator of this premature ejaculation. With its confrontational stare and overly sexual content, the drawing is a reprise of Manet’s *Olympia*; and, like that painting, Pettibon’s work transfers power from the presumably male spectator to the typically submissive female subject. Yet, in a sly shift of *Olympia*’s gender dynamics, this spectator is degraded even further: he becomes an inadequate performer, rather than an authoritarian consumer of sex. The drawing not

only grants the woman the dominant position, but strikes to the very core of masculine prowess.

A range of similar vixens, comfortable with their bodies as well as their weapons, populate the *Lana* zine. Most are descendants of shady *film noir* vamps—themselves the progeny of nineteenth century symbolist temptresses.<sup>44</sup> Pettibon, however, replaces their seductive cool detachment with wanton nastiness. Another page presents an armed woman in a doorway (fig. 66). The work's only tagline, "CAUGHT IN THE ZIPPER," is ambiguous—until one realizes that, while she is looking in the viewer's eyes, her pistol is aimed at his crotch. That this viewer is male and heterosexual is implied by both the subject and the filmic visual style, yet Pettibon thrusts him head-on into a situation that immediately undermines the erotic allure of the noir-ish trope.<sup>45</sup> The work is unnerving, not only in its implication of physical violence, but in its psychological insinuations—its

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<sup>44</sup> The *femme fatale* is a recurring character in a wide range of late nineteenth century art, poetry, literature and theater. Film noir was a term coined by French critics to characterize a trend of American crime and detective movies that emerged in the 1940s and reached its peak in the postwar era. Based largely on the hard-boiled private-eye novels of authors such as Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, these films convey moods of alienation, bleakness and disillusionment in an expressionistic, high-contrast black and white style. The female characters in these films are either reliable, trustworthy women or mysterious and duplicitous seductresses. Male protagonists often have to choose between the two extremes, invariably picking the latter—the *femme fatale*—who leads them toward paths of moral ambiguity. For an overview of the *femme fatale*, its origins in the nineteenth century and its more contemporary manifestations, see *The Femme Fatale: Erotic and Fatal Muse*, by Virginia Allen (Albany, NY: Whitston Publishing, 1983).

<sup>45</sup> Laura Mulvey has most famously identified the "scopophilic" underpinnings of traditional filmic language—the ways in which it establishes the spectator's gaze as decidedly heterosexual and male, while the women depicted on screen are presented as the sexualized subjects of that gaze (Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" *Screen* 16, no. 3 [Autumn 1975]).

deliberately heavy-handed acknowledgement of the relationship between castration anxiety and sexual desire.

Indeed, the females that inhabit Pettibon's world openly contradict stereotypes of femininity. Overtly sexual beings, they are frequently naked and engaged in some sort of coital or post-coital activity. Yet, the inclination to view them as sex objects, and thus be aroused by their presence, is routinely undermined by their discordant personas. Rather than pinups, naughty seductresses, or submissive participants, Pettibon's women are brutal killers, abusers, and other corrupted individuals. Their belligerence and rage is almost always directed at men—husbands, lovers, fathers—most of which are present only in the accompanying text or as the external focus of the depicted woman's fury. Pettibon renders femininity a source of violent sexual and psychological power in order to mount an aggressive attack on normative masculinity and femininity, along with the popular clichés associated with them. Twisting gender codes, he forces them to work against themselves, leaving the viewer to negotiate the ensuing entanglement of contradictory signs and impulses.

Thus, Pettibon presents an assortment of jacked-up *femme fatales*, hyperbolized characterizations of the female as an object of erotic danger. Along with those featured in *Lana*, these sordid sirens appear throughout the artist's oeuvre. The 1985 cover of *Cars, TV, Rockets, H-Bomb—You Name It* (fig. 67), for example, depicts a naked female wielding a bloody axe over a decapitated male head. Her defense—"PERHAPS THE FACT THAT I HADN'T HAD SEX IN 3 WHOLE DAYS LEFT ME VULNERABLE"—satirizes the crass myth that a woman's bitchiness is a result of her need to get laid. By depicting women as overtly sexual and pugnaciously off-putting at

the same time, Pettibon caricaturizes their objectification. He complicates the reception of his characters, but does so by actually un-complicating the issues at play in that reception. Through overstatement and bluntness, Pettibon desublimates the sadomasochism underlying stereotypical representations of sexualized females. The masculine viewer remains simultaneously aroused and accountable—an uncomfortable position without a satisfactory way out.

Coexistent with Pettibon's vehemently nasty women is an similarly disturbing set of male characters. In a drawing from *A New Wave of Violence* (1982) (fig. 68), an adolescent boy in women's panties declares "MY MOTHER TURNED ME ON TO VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN." The image presents a disconcerting scene, replete with a bloody handprint and knife jutting out from the floor on which he lies. It is troubling, not only in the implied carnage, but more so because of its disorienting mix of signifiers, namely boyhood cross-dressing and motherly sexual abuse. Shocking and humorous at the same time, the narrative riddle presented by the clash of image and text contains a number of possible explanations, all uncomfortable and none conclusive. Again, Pettibon accentuates a range of psychological complexities preferred to remain unstated—the sexual ambivalences of youth, the bond between sex and violence, and the oedipal attraction of mother and son.

In stark contrast to his ferociously forceful femmes, Pettibon's men are often emotionally confused, physically weak and vulnerable. And, along with these unmanly men, a recurring character in Pettibon's work is the erect phallus itself. Represented by upturned shafts thrust inward from outside the picture frames, these unequivocal symbols of manhood are imbued with conflict. The drawings are peppered with an array of

voices, including external commentaries from unseen contributors and dialogues taking place either within the minds of individual members or between two or more personified penises. This interplay of images and texts produces a range of highly ambiguous effects, yet all of these hard-on silhouettes are rendered both physically and emotionally exposed. As solitary figures in a blank open field, castrated by the edge of the picture frame, Pettibon's "talking heads" literally and figuratively have no balls. Devoid of their usual connotations of power and authority, they appear defenseless—an effect often enhanced by the accompanying texts. Betraying a complex mix of uncertainty, fear and discomfort, these penile protagonists often doubt their own sexuality, divulging romantic insecurities, ambivalences and secret homosexual desires. Meanwhile, the poetic musings, dumb humor, incongruous juxtapositions, double-entendres and impenetrable narrative threads that characterize this series causes meaning to continually shift. The primary agent of male virility—the erection—and the clichés of masculinity it signifies, are complicated by male psychological states at odds with their own physical desires and culturally conditioned roles.

In his more pointed reconfigurations of canonical male types, Pettibon makes this indirect critique explicit, offering deeper disruptions of gender norms. These works portray cultural entities and role models that directly contribute to the formation of American masculine identity. In a page from *Capricious Missives* (1983) (fig. 69), for example, male fingers hold a baseball card of Ted Kluszewski, the 1950s first baseman for the Cincinnati Reds, above the line, "MY FIRST ORGASM." The beefy, sleeveless baseball player—Big Klu, as he was nicknamed—here embodies two socially

incongruous impulses: he is both a quintessential model of normative masculinity and an object of the homosexual desire underlying male worship of athletic heroes.

In fact, Pettibon often uses baseball—of which he is a long-time fan—as a cipher of cultural attitudes and ideals. An untitled drawing from 1987 (fig. 70) depicts an old time ball player, dressed in a baggy, fifties-style uniform. He is a figure of American nostalgia, a personification of what is commonly considered a more genuine time, when values were supposedly stable and life simpler—a time when men were men. Yet, he reveals his own vulnerability, asking “WHO AM I? WHAT KIND OF MAN AM I?” The answer hits like a ton of bricks: “THE .250 MAN.” In baseball lingo, .250 is the mark of mediocrity, and the worried look on the batter’s face as he swings through a pitch reveals that that is exactly what he fears. Pettibon has transformed the cultural icon into an allegory of the common man, poignantly capturing the despair of not living up to a standard of manliness untenable to all but the all-star athlete.<sup>46</sup>

Pettibon similarly uses the comic-book superhero—an archetype of maleness much like the fifties baseball player—to confront restrictive gender conceptions. Coursing with testosterone, superheroes are supreme symbols of virility, quintessential role models for young boys. Playing off of the values these characters are presumed to embody, Pettibon remodels them into complex, contradictory individuals. In a sense, he humanizes these otherwise one-dimensional idols, breaking through their mythologized veneer of pure virtuosity and self-assurance. These works force a grotesque clash

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<sup>46</sup> Some of Robert Rauschenberg’s work from the late 1950s and 1960s could be seen as a precedent to Pettibon’s deconstructions of male athlete worship, specifically that of baseball players. Works such as *Untitled* (ca. 1954) and *Odalisk* (1955/58)—just to name two—have been interpreted as comments on gender stereotypes and values.

between the social roles assigned to superheroes and the seditious acts and private thoughts they betray on Pettibon's pages.<sup>47</sup> In a drawing from 1992 (fig. 71), for example, we encounter Robin's thoughts in the aftermath of giving Batman a blowjob:

My mouth felt like a cavefull of dead bats and I was sure my head was upside my ass but I forced my eyes and sat up.

I felt like going back down again...

I could still taste Batman in my mouth. I had that. The taste rose to my nostrils, stale, acrid, unpleasant. He gave me something for the unpleasantness, a pill that he probably got from his utility belt; he's got everything there somewhere.

Pettibon thus recasts the Dynamic Duo as a covertly gay couple. The scandalousness of this forces consideration of the presumed heterosexuality of superheroes, who rarely display any form of romantic tendency. It also draws attention to the unacknowledged purposes of these characters, that is, their dual roles as models of proper male interaction and vessels of repressed desire. In the comic's original incarnation, the potential homoerotic underpinnings of male relations are safely channeled into the partnership of Batman and Robin, whose heterosexuality is secured by their superhero status.<sup>48</sup> Yet,

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<sup>47</sup> This effect is in marked contrast to previous works of art that appropriate comic-book imagery—most famously, Roy Lichtenstein recontextualizations, which date back to the early 1960s. Though Lichtenstein's work has been credited with dislodging hierarchies of artistic subject matter and style, his paintings largely preserve the gender standards conveyed by his sources. This is most emphatically seen in the contrast between Lichtenstein's series of military paintings (e.g. *As I Opened Fire*, 1964) and those based on romance comics (e.g. *Hopeless*, 1963). Thus, while there are undeniable surface similarities between the two artists' work—an observation which led Robert Pincus to claim that Pettibon “picks up where [Lichtenstein's] use of the comics left off in the mid-'60s” (Robert L. Pincus, “Life Lives,” *San Diego Union Tribune* (October 24, 1999): E1, E8)—it must be recognized that Pettibon's comic reconfigurations actually dismantle many of the cultural clichés upon which Lichtenstein's work depended.

<sup>48</sup> In fact, the first gay superhero, Northstar, did not emerge until 1992 and was specifically created to deal with the growing problem of AIDS (Richard Reynolds, *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology* [Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 1992], 81).

allegations that this is merely a thin veil have been made by fans and critics alike. Umberto Eco, in his essay, “The Myth of Superman” (1979), notes “the consistently homosexual nature of characters like Superman or Batman,” citing the latter as an especially emphatic example.<sup>49</sup> In his more recent analysis of the genre, *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology* (1992), Richard Reynolds points out that, whereas Batman is probably the least sexual superhero, embodying an “ascetic and asexual persona,”<sup>50</sup> his image betrays an “exaggerated and kinky form of macho sex appeal.”<sup>51</sup> This, despite the fact—or maybe because of the fact—that such comic books are marketed exclusively to boys.<sup>52</sup> Pettibon makes this underlying sexuality explicit and uses it to attack the rigid standards of behavior posited by such emblems of masculinity. As Richard Dyer points out in his critical study of popular culture, *Only Entertainment* (1992), this technique can be highly effective in undermining those behavioral standards and their broad social implications. He notes that “by taking the signs of masculinity and eroticizing them in a blatantly homosexual context, much mischief is done to the security with which ‘men’ are defined in society, and by which their power is secured.”<sup>53</sup> Pettibon employs this

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<sup>49</sup> Umberto Eco, “The Myth of Superman,” in *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1979), 115.

<sup>50</sup> Reynolds, 68. Note that while Superman has Lois Lane as a love interest, there is no romantic counterpart for Batman.

<sup>51</sup> Reynolds, 81.

<sup>52</sup> Roger Sabin, *Comics, Comix and Graphic Novels: A History of Comic Art* (London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 1996), 44.

<sup>53</sup> Richard Dyer, “Getting Over the Rainbow: Identity and Pleasure in Gay Cultural Politics,” in *Only Entertainment* (London: Routledge, 1992), 159-72).

strategy to expose the veiled homoerotics present both between Batman and Robin and between male fans and their superhero idols.

Ultimately, the self-doubt, internal conflicts and insecure identities disclosed by Pettibon's numerous renditions of Batman and Robin cut to the core of superhero myths, which are uniformly based on figures of supreme confidence, security and moral clarity. This absolute assurance is the counterpart to their superhuman physical might. Together, these sides form the basis of an idealized masculinity—to which lesser mortals, in both the comic universe and the real world, are expected to aspire.<sup>54</sup> The original superhero, Superman, was, according to creator Jerry Siegel, conceived of in exactly this way—as a “character like Samson, Hercules and all the strong men I have ever heard tell of rolled into one. Only more so.”<sup>55</sup> This supermale, and his subsequent offshoots, are then afforded the responsibility of protecting and reinforcing social and cultural norms against the forces of turmoil. As Reynolds explains:

A key ideological myth of the superhero comic is that the normal and everyday enshrines positive values that must be defended through heroic action... The normal is valuable and is constantly under attack, which means that almost by definition the superhero is battling on behalf of the status quo.<sup>56</sup>

While Pettibon does offer riffs on Superman, it is his Batman works that are especially effective in rupturing this ideal. As much as any superhero, Batman's role is

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<sup>54</sup> The issue of superheroines, such as Wonder Woman, is beyond the scope of this study. However, as Richard Reynolds points out, these characters wholly conform to the male-oriented comic world (see Reynolds, 34).

<sup>55</sup> Jerry Siegel, quoted in “The Man of Tomorrow and the Boys of Yesterday,” by Dennis Dooley, in *Superman at Fifty! The Persistence of a Legend*, ed. Dennis Dooley and Gary Engle (Cleveland: Octavia Press, 1987), 26.

<sup>56</sup> Reynolds, 77.

to protect the “normal” order of things against a litany of supervillains who seek to disrupt that order.<sup>57</sup> These archenemies are the embodiments of contradiction. They are malevolent hybrids, mutant mixtures of supposed opposites: the Joker, for example, who combines humor and crime; the Riddler, whose weapon is paradox itself; and Two-Face who, being equally divided between good and evil, flips a coin to determine which side takes precedence in each of his decisions. Batman, by contrast, is the stalwart enforcer of lawful propriety, always able to quell the threats of abnormality and chaos presented by these malfeasants.

The comic thus provides standards of appropriate male behavior, both in its Manichean representations of good and evil, and in the notions of normative masculinity its heroes project. In fact, Reynolds concludes that “the mythologizing of sexuality is a potential key to the ways in which superhero myths address the questions of power and justice within the societies they depict and/or reflect.”<sup>58</sup> The superhero world is one in which distinctions are clear, categories resolutely stable. The notion that masculinity consists of brute strength, ingenuity, courage, and heterosexuality is never in doubt. Pettibon’s protagonists contradict this presumption, simultaneously imparting a host of conflicting impulses—cool rationalism and romantic passion, physical might and emotional fragility, heterosexuality and homoerotics, supreme confidence and psychological insecurity.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>59</sup> Pettibon himself sees his superhero reconfigurations as a way to critique American values (see Dennis Cooper, in conversation with Raymond Pettibon, in *Raymond Pettibon*, by Robert Storr et al [London: Phaidon Press Ltd, 2001], 25).

## Manly Crafts

In an essay on the work of the Swedish pop artist Oyvind Fahlström—whose comic-book deconstructions serve as precedents to Pettibon’s—Kelley notes the subversive possibilities of such reconfigurations:

Comic books offered a potentially rich source reflecting contemporary mythologies, values, and belief systems in clear image tropes comprehensible to the culture... Presented in their normal narrative context, these image tropes remain invisible and thus ‘natural.’...Fahlström reveals that these image tropes are manufactured, often arbitrarily coded, and thus ‘unnatural.’ As manmade images, they are politicized; and Fahlström re-presents them as deliberately constructed toward specific social ends.<sup>60</sup>

Indeed, the same can be said of Pettibon’s comic recreations. Unlike Fahlström’s pastiches, however, Pettibon’s particular strategy is the same one he employs in his *femme fatale*, penis and baseball works: the conflation of opposites. Together, these works problematize conventional readings of gender, obstructing simplistic categorizations and stereotypes. Populated by a host of emasculated men and macho women, Pettibon’s drawings offer an open play of contradiction. Kelley similarly weaves masculinity and femininity into tangled webs that cannot be unraveled into conventional categories. Yet, his work not only engages the gender myths addressed by Pettibon, but also addresses specific theoretical positions presented by the feminist debates of the 1970s and 80s—and particularly those within contemporary art discourse itself. Kelley dislodges connotations through incongruous combinations of gender-coded materials,

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<sup>60</sup> Mike Kelley, “Myth Science” (1995), reprinted in *Foul Perfection*, 162-64.

techniques and historical references, which together evoke contradictory—and ultimately irresolvable—associations.

*More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid* (1987) (fig. 72) is a melding of “high” art and kitsch. This conglomeration of found, handmade dolls and afghans mounted on canvas is a compendium of female-gendered materials and techniques—macramé, crochet, knitting, sewing and needle-point. The perverse over-abundance of these objects, with their perpetually smiling faces, snuggly bodies and warmhearted coziness, conveys a discomfoting sense of sappy hominess gone haywire. In fact, it is too much sentimentality for one person to take, indeed more than can ever be repaid.

The arrangement, however, overtly recalls Jackson Pollock’s drip works, with their all-over compositions, mural sizes, lack of singular viewpoint and inclusion of non-art materials. Likewise, the shifting of the conjoined afghans from their usual horizontal position to a vertical one mimics Pollock’s shift of his canvases from floor to wall. In Kelley’s work, however, expressive “gestures” are formed not by paint, but through the interwoven skeins of yarn, fabric patterns, and cushiony lumps of stuffed-animal flesh. Nonetheless, its deliberately coordinated colors and patterns is painterly, an approach not unfamiliar to Kelley, whose early art education was, as he put it, in the “Hans Hoffman tradition...sort of half-push-pull theory and half-automatist.”<sup>61</sup> The work thus conflates two traditionally distinct realms—those of the homespun aesthetic and the modernist trope. And it is in this clash of “feminine” craft with supposedly virile, Pollock-esque expressiveness that Kelley simultaneously affords a critique of phallogentric myths of

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<sup>61</sup> Mike Kelley, interview with John Miller, 7.

action painting while, more broadly, disrupting restrictive feminist models that promote certain “female” imagery, materials and techniques.<sup>62</sup>

Reading gender into the forms and techniques of Abstract Expressionism has been a primary topic of debate in recent art criticism. In his 1993 book, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s*, historian Michael Leja deals with the movement’s mass cultural percolations, noting that it “has been recognized, from its first accounts, as a male domain, ruled by a familiar social construction of ‘masculine’ as tough, aggressive, sweeping, bold.”<sup>63</sup> The specific associations of Pollock’s work with “maleness” have been central to this generalization, which extend into both the production and reception of the works. The scale, action and space of these paintings have been read as part of a “metaphorics of masculinity,”<sup>64</sup> while Pollock’s drip technique has been characterized in terms of urination or “manly ejaculatory splat.”<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> An especially relevant reference point for this strategy is, again, the feminist ideology espoused in the mid 1970s by the leaders of the FAP at Cal Arts. In their promotion of a “female imagery,” Chicago and Schapiro offer that “just as women have suffered when measured by male standards, so men might be found lacking when measured by the standards of that work by women which asserts softness, vulnerability and self-expression” (Chicago & Schapiro, “Female Imagery,” 41). This reasserts a strict masculine-feminine polarity, which precludes the possibility of male art that is soft, vulnerable and self-expressive—qualities that are understood as the natural dominion of women. Kelley’s misuse of objects and materials subverts such essentialist schemes.

<sup>63</sup> Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 256.

<sup>64</sup> Timothy J. Clark, “Jackson Pollock’s Abstraction,” in *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris and Montreal 1945-1964*, ed. Serge Guilbaut (Cambridge, MA & London: The MIT Press, 1990), 172-238.

<sup>65</sup> William Feaver, “The Kid from Cody,” review of the *Jackson Pollock: Drawing into Painting* exhibition (Museum of Modern Art, Oxford England, 1979), quoted in “Pollock and Krasner: Script and Postscript” (1993), by Anna Chave, reprinted in *Pollock and*

Such descriptions have fed the development of the image of Pollock as paint-slinging cowboy, as a “hard-drinkin’ . . . farmer’s son from Cody, Wyoming,” who “rode out of the Mid-West to put citified art to rights.”<sup>66</sup>

Alternative analyses of Abstract Expressionism have concentrated on the cultural politics of the era, specifically the context of the cold war.<sup>67</sup> But, whereas these accounts have shed light on the political forces at play behind the “triumph” of the New York School, they have also tended to reinforce the characterization of it as exclusively masculine. As Leja remarks, this refocusing of attention on historical context de-emphasizes the actual diversity of the members and work that constitute the movement. “As a result, Abstract Expressionism has come to appear more and more a homogeneous white male art, an apt artistic counterpart to the cold war politics of the contemporary white male U.S. political establishment.”<sup>68</sup>

Since Leja, some art historians have attempted to dismantle masculine-oriented understandings of Pollock’s work by conversely aligning him with the feminine.<sup>69</sup> This

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*After: The Critical Debate, Second Edition*, ed. Francis Frascina (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 332.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 329.

<sup>67</sup> For examples, see: Max Kozloff, “American Painting During the Cold War,” *Artforum* 11, no. 9 (May 1973): 43-54; Eva Cockroft, “Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War,” *Artforum* 12, no. 10 (June 1974): 39-41; Jane de Hart Mathews, “Art and Politics in Cold War America,” *The American Historical Review* 81 (Feb-Dec 1976): 762-787; and Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1983).

<sup>68</sup> Leja, 256.

<sup>69</sup> For example, Anna Chave has recently written of Pollock that “one might see how, in his tacit assumption of the position of the woman—the decentered and the voiceless, the

ranges from biographical details that contradict previous portrayals of the artist as a virile male to descriptions of his swirls and splatters as delicate and decorative. However, while such readings have proved significant in their rebuttal of overly masculinist readings, they often commit the same crimes as the original view of Pollock as painter-cowboy—though in inverted form. Both interpretations are limited in their adherence to a strict opposition of masculinity and femininity, an opposition that sits at the core of Abstract Expressionist myths and which belies the fact that at the time of their production, “Pollock’s linear webs...were susceptible to interpretation as both (either) masculine and (or) feminine.”<sup>70</sup> Choosing one side or the other prevents a more complete appreciation of Pollock’s achievements and the cultural references at play in the production and reception of his paintings. This precludes appropriately complex readings, which could include parallels with such things as weaving and jazz,<sup>71</sup> while still retaining the work’s intended vigor and force.

Kelley’s overt use of “feminine” materials and techniques in a work which evokes “masculine” associations wrests the historical referent—Pollock’s all-over drip works—from such restrictively gendered readings and locates it within a more ambiguous realm. *More Love Hours* thus belongs to a lineage of riffs on Abstract Expressionism that

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one who flows uncontrollably, the one who figures the void and the unconscious—he remained, on some level, a man using his masculine authority to appropriate a feminine space” (Chave, “Pollock and Krasner,” 338).

<sup>70</sup> Leja, 260.

<sup>71</sup> These connections are made by Anne E. Gibson in *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), xxiii.

similarly complicate its interpretation.<sup>72</sup> Yet, it resists the overly gendered understandings of those spin-offs as well. In his catalogue for the 1998-99 Pollock retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, Kirk Varnedoe discusses Jim Dine's *Hair* (1961) (fig. 73) and Eva Hesse's *Untitled (Rope Piece)* (1969-70) (fig. 74) as comments on Abstract Expressionist clichés. In the former, Dine is seen as satirizing “the chest-thumping macho of his predecessor’s insistently masculine reputation.” How Varnedoe comes to assume that the hair in this work is specifically male, an assumption that is fundamental to his interpretation, remains unexplained. Likewise, he reads Hesse’s work as transforming Pollock’s “liquid webs” into a “specifically feminist art.”<sup>73</sup> One can only assume that Varnedoe arrives at these interpretations solely on the basis of the artists’ sexes, for while these interpretations may indeed be feasible, nothing in the works themselves makes them conclusive. Furthermore, such views are founded on the gendered associations attached to Pollock, and more broadly, rigid gender oppositions,

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<sup>72</sup> The Abstract Expressionist “gesture” has been referenced by a wide range of work from the mid-1950s forward. These include Jasper Johns’s early paintings, which “seemed to accuse the strokes and drips of the de Kooning school of being after all only a subject matter of a different kind; which threatened the whole foundation of Abstract expressionist theory” (Leo Steinberg, “Jasper Johns: The First Seven Years of His Art,” in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth Century Art* [London, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1972], 22); Claes Oldenburg’s drippy commodities (e.g. *Pepsi-Cola*, 1961) and Roy Lichtenstein’s comic brushstrokes (e.g. *Little Big Painting*, 1965), both of which also treated the drip as a kind of subject matter while conflating it with commercial imagery; and number of artists—including Niki de Saint Phalle, Shigeo Kubota, Lynda Benglis, and Keith Boadwee—who have used the Pollock drip to confront the gender and sexuality associations of action painting (see Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject* [Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998], 94-100).

<sup>73</sup> Kirk Varnedoe, “Comet: Jackson Pollock’s Life and Work,” in *Jackson Pollock* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1998), 69-70.

which unselfconsciously align Dine's hair with masculinity and Hesse's woven ropes with femininity.<sup>74</sup>

Kelley's work forecloses those very conclusions, making a singular reading of *More Love Hours* virtually impossible. Driving a wedge between sex and gender, the work short-circuits their conflation. Its allover, gestural composition cannot signify masculine power and aggressiveness because of the supposed femininity of the materials. Its sewn and knit elements cannot be read as feminine due to the maleness of the artist and the historical precedent the work evokes. The viewer is thus left in-between these associations, which coexist without resolution.

In the end, this blending of "masculine" style and "feminine" materials—like the mixing of "art" and "craft"—subverts both constructs. Each is complicated by the other, undermining the applicability of such binaries and producing irresolvable flux within them, without simply replacing antiquated myths with more updated ones. Kelley's intention is not to substitute the notion of Abstract Expressionism as macho act with a reading of it as "feminine" craft; nor is it simply to realign traditionally "feminine"

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<sup>74</sup> A similar situation has arisen in the criticism surrounding the early sculptural work of Lynda Benglis, specifically her "fling, dribble, and dip" pieces from the late 1960s and early 1970s. Works such as *Fallen Painting* (1968) have correctly been credited with raising various gender issues surrounding their primary reference—namely, Pollock's drip paintings (see, for example, Amelia Jones, *Body Art*, 96-97). However, such readings themselves frequently fall back upon overly determined masculine-feminine binaries (e.g., the alignment of the sculptures' Day-Glo colors and horizontal positioning with femininity), while ignoring a range of additional issues raised by Benglis's work. Leslie Jones, for example, points out that "Benglis' art has been exclusively discussed in terms of patriarchal notions of femininity." As a result, "critics have attempted to confine the threatening readings of Benglis' work to the safe realms of nature and feminine excess," ignoring more general scatological issues raised by it (Leslie C. Jones, "Transgressive Femininity: Art and Gender in the Sixties and Seventies," in *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art* [New York: Whitney Museum of Art, 1993], 45).

techniques with “masculine” ones. Rather, it is to destabilize such classifications. The ultimate effect is not anti-Pollock, nor anti-craft, but a dismantling of the essentialist categories that restrict works of art to particular meanings at the expense of ignoring qualities that may in fact evoke their opposites.<sup>75</sup> This effectively makes the works themselves—Pollock’s, Kelley’s, and the anonymous creators of the dolls and blankets—more problematic. But it also allows for a richness and complexity of interpretation that belies gender-oriented pigeonholing.

Kelley’s twisting of gendered types becomes more flagrant (and shameless) in his *Manly Craft* series (1989) (fig. 75). Here, he binds sets of yarn-octopi into blatantly phallic forms. These handwoven dildos, with their braided cocks and perpetually smiling balls, are supremely perverse, continuously oscillating between cuddly playthings and castrated penises nailed to a wall. Again, the cultural connotations of the knit materials (coded “feminine”) conflict with the penile forms, an effect emphasized by the additional incongruity between the flaccidity of the yarn and erectile postures of the organs. This quintessentially grotesque clash of form and content destabilizes such gendered associations, while the work’s rude, shrewdly dumb brand of humor elicits a laughter that is at once ribald and discomfiting. Kelley’s own maleness also comes into play here, as he co-opts the feminine with such brazen crudeness—literally transforming feminized materials and techniques into the most base symbols of masculinity—that the very applicability of gender labels is thrown into doubt. Men are not supposed to fool around

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<sup>75</sup> In her introduction to the catalogue for Kelley’s 1993 retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art, Elizabeth Sussman notes that in resisting “masculinist art,” Kelley also refuses to align himself with feminism, which “seemed to adhere to the same essentialist utopianism as male modernism” (Sussman, 27).

with dolls and needlework. The artist acknowledges this when he explains that his sculptures are “about playing with gender expectations. It seems odd for a man to play with crafts, sewing and stuffed animals.”<sup>76</sup>

And the conundrum these works posit is, like the internal conflicts of *More Love Hours*, ultimately irresolvable. Just as, in order to see these objects purely as penises, their toy-octopus qualities must be overlooked, to see them as purely male, the “femininity” of the hand-sewn materials must likewise be suppressed. Both tasks are, it turns out, impossible. Because these objects are thoroughly impure, they cannot be definitively designated male or female. In a world where craft is aligned with the feminine (and penises with the masculine), they have no place. As with Pettibon’s phalluses, they are without context; they literally float alone on the gallery wall. These unmanly man-forms and unwomanly woman-materials force a collapse of distinctions, leaving the viewer stuck between double readings. Couched in adolescent vulgarity, they are playful hybrids loaded with complex, irreconcilable meanings. The fluidity of those meanings effectively undermines culturally produced gender connotations.

The themes and techniques of Kelley’s *Manly Crafts* and *More Love Hours* reached their apogee in a series of afghan-and-doll floor works from around 1990. Returning the blankets to their horizontal formats, Kelley again riffs on Pollock’s painting technique in works such as *Untitled (Yarn)* (1990) (fig. 76), while also evoking another modernist trope: Minimalism. Here again, the culturally feminized materials

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<sup>76</sup> Mike Kelley, interviewed by Thomas Kellein, in *Mike Kelley, Thomas Kellein: A Conversation* (Ostfildern: Cantz Verlag, 1994), 5.

Kelley appropriates clash with both the formal attributes of the sculptures and the assumptions inherent to the recognition of the artist's own gender.

Situated on the floor, in direct confrontation with the space of the spectator who circulates around them, these works evoke many of the characteristics of Minimalist sculpture—specifically its penchant for grid-like, pedestal-less arrangements. The work of Carl Andre, such as *144 Lead Square* (1969) (fig. 77), is most comparable here. Like Andre, Kelley arranges his floor pieces in rectangular formations, with close attention to the materials at hand. In *Arena #1 (Blue and Red)* (1990) (fig. 78) and *Arena #9 (Blue Bunny)* (1990) (fig. 79), for example, colors are deliberately coordinated to emphasize the abstract qualities of the forms. In *Mooney* (1990) (fig. 80), geometric composition is likewise carefully calibrated.

Thus, despite the cultural connotations of their found elements, these works effectively obscure the traditionally indelible line between modernist sculpture and arts-and-crafts keepsake. This provides a continual slippage not only between the high and the low, but between the gender associations such distinctions facilitate. The assumed masculine-feminine binary is problematized as Minimalism's hard, industrial aesthetic and clean, shiny surfaces become soft, handmade, ratty and worn. Likewise, the unqualified adherence to pure abstraction in works like *144 Lead Square* is obscured in Kelley's reconfigurations, which conversely evoke figurative, if not narrative, readings, even as they acknowledge formal qualities of color, material and composition.

Like Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism's association with masculinity—in terms of both its materials and techniques—has been repeatedly asserted. In fact, around the time that Kelley was producing his afghan pieces, historian Anna Chave was

deciphering the gender codes of Minimalism in her essay, *Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power* (1990). Chave argues that the work of Minimalism's primary (male) artists reinscribes, rather than resists, dominant patriarchal authority.<sup>77</sup> Whereas conventional accounts of the movement portray it as generally apolitical, pure and uncontaminated by ideology, adhering to Eugene Goosen's 1966 declaration that "the spectator is not given symbols, but facts,"<sup>78</sup> Chave contradicts such accounts by reinscribing associations into the work. "That what is rigorous and strong is valued while what is soft or flexible is comic or pathetic emerges again and again in the Minimalists' discourse, as it does in the everyday language of scholars," she points out. This, according to Chave, is the crux of Minimalism's "masculinist" tendency to strive toward ideals of power, strength and aggressiveness, ideals traditionally employed as measures of proper maleness.<sup>79</sup>

By transforming the Minimalist aesthetic into hand-sewn craft, Kelley similarly exposes the "symbolism" embedded in the material itself—its socio-cultural meanings—regardless of whether it is considered "representational" or not. Yet he avoids the pitfalls of both Goosen and Chave, who tend to schematize the work according to certain conventions, though from seemingly antithetical positions. Both sides force the art into preconceived classifications in the face of conflicting evidence. Chave's article clearly

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<sup>77</sup> Chave explains that "by manufacturing objects with common industrial and commercial materials in a restricted vocabulary of geometric shapes," the Minimalists "availed themselves of the authority of the makers of industry and technology... [an] authority implicit in the identity of the materials and shapes the artists used." (Anna C. Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power" (1990), reprinted in *Art in Modern Culture: An Anthology of Critical Texts*, ed. Francis Francina and Jonathan Harris [London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1992], 264).

<sup>78</sup> Quoted in Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," 266.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 270-72.

exposes the limitations of readings exemplified by Goosen's statement, but she restricts her study to only those artists who complement her argument, ignoring those whose work does not fit neatly into strict gender-oriented categories.<sup>80</sup> Kelley himself acknowledges the tendency by historians to disregard artists that do not fit such categories. He has referred to Larry Bell, for instance, as "one of those critically hated 'decorative' minimalists," and complained that John McCracken's lipstick-colored planks are dismissed by critics as "sissy minimalism."<sup>81</sup> Furthermore, Chave's willingness to align adjectives such as "rigorous," "strong," "industrial," and "powerful" with masculinity (in opposition to feminized terms such as "soft," "flexible," and "pathetic") situates her argument within stereotypical gender oppositions, despite her attempts to expose, and undermine, their manifestations. A more nuanced account would acknowledge that whereas patriarchal, authoritarian qualities may indeed be inherent to the work, this does not necessarily mean that incongruous qualities do not coexist alongside them. Kelley's work, in contrast to Chave's article, complicates such readings and the issues they evoke. It precludes the replacement of overly rigid interpretations with equally rigid revisions.

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<sup>80</sup> For example, with a less-than-thorough treatment of the issues it broaches, Chave dismisses Carl Andre's stated desire to neutralize the traditional "phallic" positioning of sculpture by placing his work along the floor: "Most sculpture is priapic with the male organ in the air. In my work Priapus is down on the floor. The engaged position is to run along the earth." (Carl Andre, quoted in Chave, 268). Likewise, she ignores women who have employed the supposedly masculine grid as the basis of their work. In 1972, Lucy Lippard noted that "many of the artists who have drawn from the grid's precise strains a particularly unique interpretation are women," such as Agnes Martin, Dona Nelson, and Eva Hesse (Lucy Lippard, "The Great Grid Irony," originally published in *Grids*, [Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1972], reprinted in *From the Center*, 64-65). What Lippard's comment makes clear is that in the aftermath of Minimalism, its forms were not seen as gender exclusive. It is only more recently that such readings have taken over and become ossified.

<sup>81</sup> Mike Kelley, "Death & Transfiguration," 145-46.

Kelley achieves this by polluting nearly every quality of canonical Minimalism, while refusing to pass definitive judgment on it. The results are works that oscillate between multiple (traditionally oppositional) readings, but which can never be contained by any one of them. Kelley acknowledges this effect and the specific complication this poses to traditional readings of Minimalist-type sculpture:

The placement on the floor makes you think of certain historic formal discussions. Yet the materials themselves deny that discussion because the materials relate to hearth and home... Of all my works, they are the most about categories, about confusion of category. You strive to categorize them.<sup>82</sup>

Kelley's use of softness, in direct contrast to the hardness of the Minimalist aesthetic, also has gender implications independent of the specific objects and materials appropriated. "'Hard' and 'soft,'" he explains, "are often associated with gender orientations—hard and soft rock for example." Dismantling such associations by using them against themselves is something he recognizes in the work of artists like Salvador Dalí, Claes Oldenburg, and Peter Saul, who employ "supposedly feminine softness to attack and destabilize rigid patriarchal order." "What we confront here," he concludes, "is a kind of artistic gender bending."<sup>83</sup>

In his own work, Kelley takes this tactic a step further, addressing not just the connotations of formal attributes (i.e. softness and hardness), but the gendering of the very materials (yarn, thread, etc.) and processes (knitting, sewing, etc.) of production. The power, strength and boldness of Minimalism's industrial materials are conspicuously absent in contrast to the weak, soft and limp substances Kelley chooses. Caught between

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<sup>82</sup> Mike Kelley, interview with John Miller, 44.

<sup>83</sup> Mike Kelley, "Foul Perfection," 32.

interpretations of the work, viewers are left to contemplate the different effects of those materials and the cultural conventions they transmit.<sup>84</sup> It is Kelley's "feminization" of Minimalism that actually reveals its tendencies to be understood as inherently masculine.

In all his knit works, Kelley's strategy is fundamentally one of artistic cross-dressing. Rather than donning women's clothes, however, he takes up traditionally feminine techniques and materials in order to dramatize the artificiality and instability of conventional categories. By pointing out just how over-determined popular gender paradigms are, Kelley subverts canonical readings as well as those which ultimately reinscribe stereotypes while attempting to undermine them. Threading the needle between masculinity and femininity, Kelley's use of materials and techniques is a form of drag that plays off of gender codes, intermingling and polluting them so that they crumble from within.

This deconstruction of gender codes is then hammered home in Kelley's 1992 series of woodworking sculptures done for Documenta IX.<sup>85</sup> *Colema Bench* (fig. 81) is a homemade, 84-inch-high colon-cleansing contraption made of unfinished wood. It

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<sup>84</sup> In this sense, the Robert Morris's felt works from the late 1960s and early 1970s can be seen as precedents to Kelley's plush sculptures. In *Untitled (Six Legs)* (1969), for example, Morris likewise operates against the hard geometry of Minimalism, conversely emphasizing the effects—physical, psychological and cultural—of soft, droopy materials. These works have been characterized as "feminine," both at the time of their production (see, for example, Grace Glueck, "A Feeling for the Felt," *The New York Times* (April 28, 1968): 28) and in more recent analyses (see, for example, Leslie C. Jones, "Transgressive Femininity," 43). Such sculptures exemplified Morris's key theoretical position of the time, most succinctly articulated in his 1968 essay, "Anti Form" (see Robert Morris, *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris* [Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1993], 41-49).

<sup>85</sup> Documenta IX—the 1992 installment of the international art exhibition founded in 1955 and held in Kassel, Germany, every five years—was organized by Belgian curator Jan Hoet.

consists of a bench with a hole leading to a pail underneath. Overhead hangs a bucket, presumably to be filled with water, which would then flow through a tube and into the rectum of the person sitting above the hole. *Kneading Board* (fig. 82) is a giant-size wood paddle, on the side of which hang actual found paddles and similarly shaped bread boards. The work is designed for people to sprawl across it and receive a beating. It is a ridiculous, yet harrowing, exaggeration of initiation ceremonies common to fraternal organizations, exposing the sadomasochistic underpinnings of such rituals.

Drenched in testosterone, these woodworks are basically the manly companions to Kelley's womanly knit pieces:

For documenta 9 I decided that I would shift and adopt the role of the 'male' artist and do some woodshop work. Like dad in the basement working with his tablesaw. I did a group of sculptures in wood, which is often perceived as a manly material. Each sculpture represents a different fictive man's ideology or perversion.<sup>86</sup>

*Torture Table* (fig. 83) is probably the most disturbing of the series. It consists of a plywood table equipped with a pillow, and a hole positioned at the point of the genitals, with a metal tray underneath. Attached to the table's side is a knife, ready to be unsheathed for who-knows-what act of surgical cruelty.

Thus inhabiting the über-masculine, Kelley again establishes a gap between sex and gender. As with his afghan pieces, this is achieved through a sociological approach to materials, in which the gender associations of certain substances—in this case, wood—are foregrounded, eliciting reflection on the artificiality of those very associations. Similar in strategy to Pettibon's distortions, these works are not the results of gender bending, but gender overkill.

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<sup>86</sup> Mike Kelley, interview with Thomas Kellein, 5.

## Meat Cake

In his 1976 video, *Rocky* (fig. 84), a naked McCarthy performs a mordant caricature of the popular movie of the same name and year. Wearing boxing gloves and a full-head rubber bandit mask, he alternates between shadow-boxing, masturbation, and beating himself with stiff upper-cuts, body-blows and jabs to the face. Intermittently, he pauses to smear his gloves, penis and buttocks with ketchup—whose signification continually shifts from pugilistic blood to masturbatory lubrication to menstrual bleeding. The melee continues for over twenty minutes. Grunting and groaning through it all, the artist becomes increasingly exhausted, his self-pummeling all the more excruciating to behold. Like Pettibon's Batman parodies, McCarthy thus employs an exaggerated masculinity to complicate gender norms. The work mocks the manliness of the Hollywood hunk—the cinematic equivalent of the comic book superhero.

As with Kelley's castrated cock octopi and Pettibon's lone penises, McCarthy's frank nakedness undermines popular connotations of male power, whose implied priapic prowess relies on the concealment of the flaccid phallus. Movies such as *Rocky* display a plethora of bare beefy torsos, but they never breach the strict taboo against male frontal nudity. Genitals exposed, McCarthy's *Rocky* is rendered vulnerable, while the male organ, supreme symbol of masculinity, is effectively neutralized through the menstrual associations and his repeated, but unconsummated, masturbation.<sup>87</sup> His is not only an unveiled penis, but a malfunctioning one—a limp-dick. Despite *Rocky*'s physical might and persistent stroking, he just can't seem to get it up.

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<sup>87</sup> Jones, "Paul McCarthy's Inside Out Body," 128.

The brutal beating and blatant sexualization of this protagonist draw attention to the sublimated desires that are satisfied by the male bodies featured in such films. In his 1993 article, “Eastwood Bound,” Paul Smith identifies a particular plot formula in American action movies like *Rocky*. Almost all, he notes, present an idealized male hero that endures requisite bodily mutilations—thrashings, wounds, torture, fistfights—only to triumph in the end.<sup>88</sup> The male body is effectively fetishized. This, according to Smith, constitutes yet another colonization of traditionally female roles by men, who here take the place of sexually objectified women.

In *Rocky*, McCarthy literalizes this underlying objectification, upsetting the clear gender characterization offered by Sylvester Stallone’s version. McCarthy remolds this definitive icon of pure masculine virtue into one that embodies impulses—autoerotic, homoerotic, and sadomasochistic—considered inconsistent with that very identity. The viewer is thus confronted with a highly ambiguous character. The subconscious desires embodied by the movie’s archetypal, chiseled male figure, actually a contemporary, but grossly inflated, reprise of the classical nude, are made explicit, facilitating an uncomfortable confrontation with them. The ideal form is corrupted through overt sexuality and self-abuse. McCarthy’s *Rocky* stands as a parody of the macho movie hero, revealing the psychological underpinnings of such standard clichés of popular culture. Caricaturizing these representations of idealized masculinity, McCarthy destabilizes them through the coexistence of presumably incongruous qualities—brutality and humor, real pain and fake blood, wholesome morality and deviant sexuality.

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<sup>88</sup> Paul Smith, “Eastwood Bound,” (1993) in *Constructing Masculinity*, 77-97.

Such confrontations with masculinity are present in a number of his works. And, as Kelley does with his knit pieces, McCarthy repeatedly intercepts the excessive gendering of artistic types, specifically that of Abstract Expressionism. He implicitly challenges the macho myths associated with the movement in an early video titled *Penis Dip Painting* (1974), for example. Using his penis as a paintbrush, the artist dips it in a can of black house paint and “paints” with it on a sheet of clear glass—a mockery of Pollock’s own filmed glass paintings from the early 1950s. McCarthy thus offers a deconstruction of the same “metaphorics of masculinity” that Kelley complicates in *More Love Hours*. Literally conflating the paintbrush with the penis, the work blatantly satirizes Abstract Expressionist clichés. Similar AbX parodies are presented in several of McCarthy’s early works—including *Face Painting-Floor, White Line* (1972) (fig. 85) and *Whipping a Wall With Paint* (1974) (fig. 86)—and have more recently reemerged in an elaborate video, titled *Painter* (1995) (fig. 87).

It is McCarthy’s cross-dressing, however, that is most directly comparable to Kelley’s gender grotesqueries. From the mid-seventies forward, McCarthy’s performances and videos elicit similar category disruptions through characters of hybridized masculinity and femininity. In *Experimental Dancer – Rumpus Room* (1975) (fig. 88), a naked and shaved McCarthy dons a dopey rubber mask and playfully prances around the room with his genitals pushed back behind his legs. His bobbing “dance” is at once imbecilic and erotic, as he strokes his body, caresses his breasts and poses with his arms above his head. His heavy breathing from behind the mask serves as the work’s only soundtrack. The result is a disturbingly epicene character, but whose confused sexuality is itself shown to be a blatant deception, as McCarthy repeatedly “fingers” his

ersatz vagina only to then turn around and reveal his hidden penis. However, the perverse qualities of the figure stem not only from this mannered androgyny but from a host of additional ambiguities—including his/her personal motivation, age and mental condition—which further complicate the work’s reception, making its deranged yet engaging protagonist even more discomforting and impossible to classify or explain.

The problems such works pose to gender categories are effected through a kind of double-negation—a transformation of gender codes into their opposites only to further complicate that very transformation by revealing the artificiality of the entire system of gender designation. Each time femaleness is intimated, it is quickly obscured by an overt reference to actual maleness—a method similar to that employed by Vito Acconci in his 1971 Super-8 film, *Conversions. Part II (Insistence, Adaptation, Groundwork, Display)* (fig. 89). Acconci’s own description of the work sums up its effect:

Naked, I’m practicing a new body: the camera shoots me from the head down, I’m keeping my penis confined between my legs, my body looks as if it has a vagina...

I’m exercising my body: six 3-minute exercises—walking, running, stretching, kicking, jumping, sitting down and sitting back up. (My penis slips out... I push it back in... the game is up when I turn around and my testicles are exposed from behind... I move towards the camera again and show my vagina...)<sup>89</sup>

Though his maleness is never really in doubt, and is in fact repeatedly exposed, one cannot avoid reading the triangular patch of hair between Acconci’s legs as vaginal—an effect that elicits reflection on the genitalia as the essential signifier of human sexuality.

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<sup>89</sup> Vito Acconci, description from 1971 Super-8 film, “Conversions. Part II (Insistence, Adaptation, Groundwork, Display),” in *Vito Acconci: Writings, Works, Projects*, ed. Gloria Moure (Barcelona: Ediciones Polígrafa, 2001), 118.

McCarthy takes this rudimentary exercise further, staging more elaborate and theatrical contortions and delving deeper into gender classification. Most significantly, McCarthy extends the play with identity codes beyond the biological, into the socio-cultural realm. *Sailor's Meat* (1975), a video performance produced at the height of the seventies feminist art movement, is a prime example. Here, the protagonist of the work continually swings between gender categories, due not only to the manipulation of his body parts, but also to the transvestite costume he adorns. From the start, the caked-on makeup and blonde wig cast this shady character as an obvious perversion of standard pin-up images. Yet, the work is more than just an attack on the erotics of mainstream culture. As the performance proceeds, McCarthy continues the transformation of his male body into a female-coded form. He slips into various items of black lacey lingerie, squeezes his pectorals in an attempt to make cleavage, arches his back into a centerfold pose, and applies red makeup to his crotch to simulate menstruation. The viewer is thus privy to the dressing of a drag queen, though it remains a type of drag in which, as in Acconci's work, the protagonist's actual maleness is never really in doubt. It is so thinly veiled as to be more of a layering of gender than a covering of one with the other. McCarthy's strategy is therefore not just one of inversion or exchange of types—penis for vagina, masculine for feminine—but of an obfuscation of biological and cultural identity, achieved through mixing, slippage, doubling and confusion.

The potential for subverting gender categories through drag performance has been theorized by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990). Attempting to expose “the way in which gender fables establish and circulate the

misnomer of natural facts,”<sup>90</sup> Butler not only challenges patriarchal institutions, but also recognizes the problems with feminist practices that rely on fixed notions of gender. She posits drag as a viable alternative to such practices, claiming that it simultaneously permits effective political agency and refutes fixed notions of both femininity and masculinity. Butler’s proposed method consists of a performed disruption of categories that forces the “natural” to rub up against the “unnatural,” resulting in a dramatization of the synthetic basis of gender identity—the fact that all gender is, in truth, a pre-scripted performance.

Drag, for Butler, becomes the quintessential practical extension of this theory. Staging the incongruity of biologically-determined sex and culturally-determined gender, rather than the equivalence between them, drag undermines the system that

implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it. When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one.<sup>91</sup>

As Butler concludes in a later essay, “Melancholy Gender/Refused Identification” (1995), by dissociating the codes of gender with their correlative sex, and thus showing it as something that can be deliberately performed, “drag imitates the imitative structure of gender, revealing gender as itself an imitation.”<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xi.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>92</sup> Judith Butler, “Melancholy Gender/Refused Identification,” in *Constructing Masculinity*, 32.

The subversiveness of both Kelley's conceptual cross-dressing and McCarthy's actual cross-dressing can be understood in this light. And yet, the possibility of “regressive” drag—exemplified by the protagonist in *Tootsie*—is not addressed by Butler. If drag holds the potential for undermining restrictive gender categories, what happens when it effectively reinforces those very categories? The answer is not just a matter of the intentions of the artist, since, as has been shown, cultural products like *Tootsie* are often characterized as groundbreaking and enlightening—and it can be presumed that the filmmakers had such intentions in mind. Likewise, one could imagine a truly radical form of drag produced by someone unaware of such implications. Drag itself is not inherently subversive.

In fact, in *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a “Postfeminist” Age* (1991), Tania Modleski points out that “male power frequently works to efface female subjectivity by occupying the site of femininity.” She thus proposes a reconsideration of “the extent to which male power is actually consolidated through cycles of crisis and resolution, whereby men ultimately deal with the threat of female power by incorporating it.”<sup>93</sup> This argument sheds light on the longstanding use of gender bending in mainstream popular culture, from Uncle Miltie<sup>94</sup> to more recent evocations. In addition to movies and television, the 1980s music scene was replete with

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<sup>93</sup> Tania Modleski, *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a “Postfeminist” Age* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 7.

<sup>94</sup> Uncle Miltie was the nickname given to Milton Berle, television host of “Texaco Star Theatre” (1948-1956). Cross-dressing was a central technique in Berle's comedy.

men-in-drag posing no threat whatsoever to patriarchal order.<sup>95</sup> Along with their simplistic inversions of sixties peace and love, heavy metal bands like Mötley Crüe cross-dressed with impunity. Despite the makeup and teased hair, their masculinity remained incontrovertible. Their feminized look was not at odds with the intense macho-ness and frank misogyny of songs such as “Girls, Girls, Girls” (1987):

Friday night and I need a fight  
 My motorcycle and a switchblade knife  
 Handful of grease in my hair feels right  
 But what I need to make me tight are

Girls, Girls, Girls  
 Long legs and burgundy lips  
 Girls  
 Dancin' down on Sunset Strip  
 Girls  
 Red lips, fingertips

Trick or treat – sweet to eat  
 On Halloween and New Year's Eve  
 Yankee girls ya just can't beat  
 But they're the best when they're off their feet...

What transpires is a cooptation of the feminine, conceived as a fixed entity that can be freely appropriated either as sexual object (in the lyrics) or spectacular façade (in the band’s look)—both for the reinforcement of male dominance. Gender bending here signals the colonization of the feminine by masculinist culture.

This, of course, is nothing new. Art historian Abigail Solomon-Godeau identifies a similar situation in the feminized masculinity of late eighteenth and early nineteenth

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<sup>95</sup> This is in contrast to earlier musicians who, in the 1970s, offered more ambiguous gender reconfigurations. Alice Cooper’s mix of drag, B-movie horror, and heavy metal is a quintessential example. For an excellent analysis of Cooper’s methodology—and its relation to the work of Mike Kelley—see Kim Gordon’s essay, “Is it my Body?” in *Mike Kelley: Catholic Tastes*, 175-82).

century French painting (e.g. Pierre-Narcisse Guérin's *Iris and Morpheus*, 1811), which coincided not with the liberation of women, but with "a heightened misogyny, a rollback in whatever rights women had briefly acquired during the revolution itself," along with the emphatic retrenchment of patriarchal rule. According to Solomon-Godeau, the catalyst for this was, and still remains, "a cultural fantasy in which the feminine can be conjured away altogether...only to be reinscribed and recuperated within a masculine representation." She thus concludes that "an eroticized and androgynous representation of masculinity does not necessarily transgress—and, indeed, may affirm—the patriarchal privileges of masculinity, however inflected."<sup>96</sup> A distinction must therefore be made between conservative gender benders and their more seditious incarnations. Butler's espousal of drag must be qualified.

The deciding factor here again stems from the issue of essentialism. Those forms of drag that enact a straightforward gender exchange, without questioning the identities that are swapped, often wind up reinforcing fixed categories of gender, even when the act is shrouded in supposed liberalism. Femininity is conceived of as a set uniform that can be safely donned by the masculine—both identities understood as givens and presumed to be universally comprehensible. Moreover, this occupation of the feminine by the masculine is correlatively understood as the male inhabiting the female. The terms are conflated, a result of the implicit equation of gender and sex. Woman-ness is understood as a feminine costume that can be freely adorned by anyone.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 73-74.

<sup>97</sup> Again, *Tootsie*'s lesson is that by donning this costume, the male protagonist realizes what it's like to be a woman, which ultimately helps him win over everyone, including

Opposing such examples are those drag performances which evoke contradictory gender associations in order to explode them from within. Cross-dressing here functions as a way to collapse the gender boundaries upon which more conservative manifestations depend. Masculinity and femininity are consequently destabilized, as well as being dissociated from their corresponding sex. The result is an obfuscation of gender divisions, indeed of the definition of gender itself. What was assumed to be a natural, cohesive extension of one's genitalia is shown to be a series of conventions and representations wholly distinct from biological maleness and femaleness. Gender is thereby denaturalized.

To accomplish this, drag must expose the imitative construction of gender by staging the artificiality of its own performance, thus throwing the conclusiveness of "femininity" and "masculinity" into question. A continuous slippage between gender readings—rather than the definitive substitution of one for the other—propels both the "performed" and the "real" gender into perpetual flux, neither permitted to secure a decisive identity. McCarthy's various gender distortions epitomize this type of hybridized drag, whose effects stand in marked contrast to the drag of simple inversion. His transformations are always incomplete. Seams are emphasized, masks explicitly shown to be just that—obvious fictions. He thus forces gender distinctions and their biological counterparts into a play of open contradiction in which none can ever hold stable. In *Sailor's Meat*, for example, McCarthy accentuates the artificiality of his "feminine" guise by continuously reminding the viewer of his maleness, either by

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the girl he desires. Michael Dorsey becomes a "better man" through his experience as a "woman," his masculinity salvaged through the co-optation of the feminine.

drawing attention to the fakeness of his get up, or more bluntly by exposing his penis. As the artist himself comments, “The illusion goes back and forth between watching a male and watching a female, and I think that the power of the piece is that you get lost.”<sup>98</sup>

Foreclosing the possibility of settling on one gender or another, McCarthy draws attention to the very construction of such identities.

*Sailor’s Meat* is just one of a number of works from the late 1970s and early 1980s in which McCarthy employs this strategy toward the deconstruction of gender. As mentioned, *Meat Cake* (1974) and *Tubbing* (1975) feature protagonists that are also simultaneously masculine and feminine, and they engage in similarly disruptive sexual activities with common foodstuffs—sausages, ketchup, margarine, ground meat. *Contemporary Cure All* (1978) (fig. 90) extends McCarthy’s fragmented cross dressing to a confusion of body parts and functions. Here, the artist performs a “sex-change,” affixing fake penises and vaginas to the crotch of a male body laid out on a table and positioned as if giving birth. In his 1983 performance, *Inside Out Olive Oil* (fig. 91), McCarthy similarly presented an elaborate layering of gender artifices. Wearing an inside-out female mask, he performed a series of obstetric activities within a giant see-through female body form. He plays doctor, baby, and mother, causing the “authentic” gender of the performer to be lost.<sup>99</sup> Rugoff has commented on this tendency in McCarthy’s work, pointing out that “the ‘characters’ [he] portrayed in his performances often eluded sexual categorization, at times crossing from one gender to another—in mid-

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<sup>98</sup> Paul McCarthy, “There’s a Big Difference Between Ketchup and Blood,” interview with Marc Selwyn (1993), reprinted in *Paul McCarthy* (Phaidon), 136.

<sup>99</sup> Jones, “Paul McCarthy’s Inside Out Body,” 125.

performance, the artist might cut off an artificial penis and implant a vagina—yet most of the time it would be more accurate to say his characters seemed *between* genders.”<sup>100</sup>

Kelley’s use of craft also fits this notion of hybridized, or incomplete, drag. As with McCarthy, the maleness of the artist clashes with the feminizing codes within the work of art—the makeup and dresses in McCarthy; the yarn and sewing in Kelley. In his essay titled “Cross-Gender/Cross-Genre,” a broad analysis of identity politics at play in popular forms of entertainment, Kelley touches upon these ideas. He covers rock-art-performance crossbreeds, including Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention, Alice Cooper, and the GTOs, and other oddball cultural hybrids, such as the Cockettes, a San Francisco-based transvestite theater troupe from the early 1970s:

The Cockettes...produced a kind of campy and parodistic transvestite theater that, unlike traditional transvestite shows, reveled in the exhibition of the incomplete pose. Though they wore extravagant costumes that mimicked 1930s Hollywood notions of glamour, their feminine masquerade was deliberately provisional and half-accomplished. The ‘queens’ often had beards—a definite no-no in transvestite acts where ‘passing’ as a woman is the sign of quality.

Kelley likewise recognizes this effect in the films of John Waters, in which he identifies “a similar play with gender slippage in the figure of the grotesque ‘drag queen’ Divine, who could never be mistaken for a woman.”<sup>101</sup> In positing drag as a form of resistance, Butler too makes reference to Divine’s roles in Water’s films, which she understands as suggesting that “gender is a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as the real. Her/his performance destabilizes the very distinctions between the natural and the artificial, depth and surface, inner and outer through which discourse about genders

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<sup>100</sup> Rugoff, “Mr. McCarthy’s Neighborhood,” 35.

<sup>101</sup> Kelley, “Cross-Gender/Cross-Genre,” 104.

almost always operates.”<sup>102</sup> Implicitly refining Butler’s terms, Kelley distinguishes between different forms of cross-dressing, indicating that it is not just drag, but “incomplete” drag, that accomplishes this.

In the end, two types of cross-dressing are thus apparent: those which retain the notion of gender as a stable entity affixed to sex, the humor or irony of the performance deriving simply from the co-optation of that fixed gender/sex by the opposite gender/sex; and those which conceive of gender as an artifice distinct from sex, the performance itself being, in Butler’s terms, one which reveals gender’s inherently performative status. For the latter to be successful, the transformation must remain consciously deficient, and attention must be directed to that very deficiency. Here, masculinity cannot fully inhabit femininity. Instead, both are exposed as hollow, culturally constructed shells. All gender is thus understood as a form of “drag,” the performance of prescribed gender roles.

The work of both Kelley and McCarthy make this last point clear. What they enact is therefore not really gender bending at all, since they do not exchange one gender for another, but rather dismantle gender signs from within in order to foreground their artificiality. More accurately, they engage in a sort of gender nullification, triggered by the grotesque mis-performance of its components. In this sense, Pettibon’s drawings are also analogous, as he actively disrupts gender types through a complication and confusion of conventional attributes. Yet, despite their concern with stereotypes, it would be a mistake to classify any of these artists’ work as feminist. The difference is in both their means and their ends, as they mount attacks on the restrictiveness not just of patriarchally-defined femininity, but of masculinity as well.

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<sup>102</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, viii.

The work of Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon thus constitutes a different sort of “men’s movement.” Their objective is not to rescue a regressive male identity in jeopardy, but rather to disrupt singular conceptions of both masculinity and femininity in a broad deconstruction of gender categories. Their solution is to attack gender in all its forms—the entire matrix of identity politics, normative behavior, and the naturalization of prescribed roles and distinctions—while avoiding the constitution of an ontological category of woman or man, femininity or masculinity. Offering no “more complete” model as an alternative, they recognize that any such model, no matter how encompassing, is by definition an abstract, an ideal—fundamentally reductive. Without recourse to a prescribed political agenda, they expose the artificiality and relativity of gender classification, revealing its implicit naturalness to be nothing more than a restrictive cultural construct.

**CHAPTER FOUR****THE KIDS AREN'T ALL RIGHT**

Peanut butter, motherfucker, tuna bitch  
You mess around with me and get your ass kicked  
'Cause you're a bad motherfucker  
Cary has a pussy, and Jay has a pussy  
And mommy has a pussy  
And aunt Lil has a little, tiny pussy  
Well, girls have pussies  
Men have pussies too  
Prickers are chopped off  
Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you, fuck you, fuck you  
I'm Michael Reimer, and I didn't do anything  
Please mom, Jay only did it  
Please, don't stick any soap in my ass  
You have smelly feet, Cary  
We had joy, we had fun  
We had reefers in the sun  
But the cop had a gun  
And they shot him in the vagina  
I put an axe in his head  
I put sticks in his eyeballs  
I went to his funeral  
I went to his grave  
Instead of flowers, I put in a grenade  
Jay kisses and Michael kisses  
And Cary kisses her mom's and dad's pussy

These are the lyrics to “Mom’s and Dad’s Pussy” (track 11), Kelley’s mid-seventies sound-collage produced for *Destroy All Monsters*.<sup>1</sup> Devoid of musical accompaniment, it is a remixed recording of band-member Cary Loren’s nephews giddily improvising on a popular playground paean.<sup>2</sup> Remarkably, the work’s riotous mix of profanity, gender bending, sex and violence prefigures much of Kelley’s subsequent art career. That this grotesquerie is essentially the work of children makes it all the more provocative, and yet such rhymes are as common to schoolyards as monkey bars and swing sets. “Mom’s and Dad’s Pussy” is the product of juvenile imaginations both fertile and foul, and its coda of gleefully mischievous giggles indicates that these kiddy performers are conscious of the naughtiness of their words. They know they’re misbehaving. The work is an expression of puerile psyches caught between childhood’s churning impulses and the social norms that label them obscene. Indeed, this conflict is what makes it so funny to them. For adults, however, the laughter is more uneasy. With perverted panache, the song insinuates that our little tykes are not as pure as we would prefer them to be.

It is no surprise that the doggerel appealed to Kelley. Much of his oeuvre is similarly set against popular myths of childhood innocence—as are those of McCarthy and Pettibon. In fact, of all the commonalities between the work of these three artists, the demystification of childhood is perhaps the most prominent.

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<sup>1</sup> Though produced in the mid-seventies, “Mom’s and Dad’s Pussy” was not released until 1994, on the three-CD box-set *Destroy All Monsters, 1974-1976* (Ecstatic Peace/Father Yod, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.sea-urchin.net/buggers/bloc.html>.

Pettibon's booklets are full of babes who flaunt their sexuality and aggression. In a drawing from *Capricious Missives* (1983), for example, a young girl glares out from the page, thrusting four fingers in the viewer's face (fig. 92). "I MASTURBATED FOUR TIMES TODAY," she brags, "I'M TOO YOUNG TO WRITE BOOKS, YOU KNOW." Such children not only regularly inhabit Pettibon's zines, but also frequently appear alongside the work of actual youngsters. Two drawings from *Capricious Missives* are by a child artist who signed them "Alex F." One (fig. 93) is of a grinning, gun-wielding snowman with a toddler-scrawled caption explaining, "SNOWMAN HAS A MASK HE IS GOING TO THE STORE TO STEAL SOME FOOD." The other (fig. 94) is less comical, featuring a bleeding, blobbish figure coupled with a dour description: "MOMMY CAME HOME FROM THE HOSPITAL WITHOUT BABY SISTER."

Later zines include similar juvenilia by Pettibon's nephew, Nelson Tarpenny, who began contributing drawings at age five.<sup>3</sup> In sardonic deference to the boy's brutal expressionism, Pettibon has dubbed him Master, referring to him as his "mentor."<sup>4</sup> *Bottomless Pond* (1986) allocates ten of its 28 pages to Tarpenny's cartoons, among them a skull with blood dripping from its sockets, a dirty old man with genitals exposed, and a boy with a handful of shit asking "NOW DO YOU WANT TO SUCK YOUR THUMB" (fig. 95). The crudeness of the drawing and the prevalence of misspelled words—blood is spelled "BLOD," pistol is "PISTLE," gross is "GROSE"—render these images

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<sup>3</sup> Hamza Walker, "Don't Throw Out the Shaman with the Bathwater," in *Raymond Pettibon: A Reader*, ed Ann Temkin and Hamza Walker (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1998), 222. Tarpenny's first appearance was in *The Bible, the Bottle, and the Bomb* (1984).

<sup>4</sup> The inside cover of *The Bible, the Bottle, and the Bomb* (1984) features a photograph of Pettibon and Tarpenny, with a caption that reads "Pettibon with his mentor, Nelson."

especially striking, for they are unmistakably the work of a young child. Peppered with profanities and inhabited by perverts and bloody corpses, Tarpenny's pictures exhibit a degree of fury, cruelty and humor worthy of Loren's naughty nephews.

In *Bottomless Pond* (1986), these scribbles are interspersed with Pettibon's own images of indecent children—the habitually masturbating girl among them. Such juxtapositions seem particularly improper and exploitative, as if the boy and his work have been misused by a manipulative adult artist. Moreover, many of the texts that augment Tarpenny's doodles are implausibly mature. Though written in a child's hand, these texts had to have been dictated to the young nephew by his impious uncle. “I miss some of my intelligence,” reads the caption that accompanies a rudimentary sketch of a crying man (fig. 96), “I wish I never sniffed glue.” Yet, indignation against the grown-up artist ring hollow in light of the child's own drawings, which not only compliment Pettibon's words, but are at least as vicious and vulgar. These works of art derive from a true collaboration. Responsibility therefore for must be equally shared, leaving the viewer in a moral predicament. The child victim, it seems, is himself quite the little monster.

McCarthy's food-flinging performances are similarly problematic. Rather than appropriating the work of children, however, he acts as one. Similar to his treatments of sex and gender, the discomfort these works elicit is often the result of a clash between McCarthy's obvious adulthood and the kiddish personas he adopts. This effect is central to *Baby Boy, Baby Magic* (1982) (fig. 97), in which the artist literally performed as a toddler. Dressed in a diaper and a giant baby-head mask, the artist spun around until dizzy, banged his head into a wall and table, smashed his face in his food, played with

dolls and penises (his own and a fake one), ate with his hands and “defecated” hamburger meat, all while limiting his vocabulary to grunts, groans and gags.<sup>5</sup> Throughout the performance, McCarthy periodically splattered himself and his props with bright-red ketchup, causing childish food-play to be conflated with bloody massacre. His more recent video-performance, *Pinocchio Pipenose Household dilemma* (1994) (fig. 98), prompts similar slippages. Here, the child-protagonist repeatedly tortures his stuffed toys, also dousing them with ketchup-blood. As Giacinto Di Pietrantonio explains in his 1996 essay on this work, by having his oafish children commit acts teeming with violence and sexuality, McCarthy effectively “unmask[s] the alleged innocence of the miscreant child.”<sup>6</sup> Like Kelley’s “Mom’s and Dad’s Pussy” and Pettibon’s Tarpenny collaborations, McCarthy’s antics are both disturbing and immanently infantile, undercutting common conceptions of youthful purity.

In its persistent evocation of childhood, the work of these three artists can thus be seen as an extension of a deep-seated lineage, reaching back to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The Rousseauian exaltation of the child pervaded romantic thought—from Friedrich Schiller’s characterization of children as inherently “pure and free” to Ralph Waldo Emerson’s claim that “the lover of nature is he...who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood”<sup>7</sup>—and the various artistic movements

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<sup>5</sup> For McCarthy’s own description of this performance, see *Paul McCarthy* (Phaidon), 123-25.

<sup>6</sup> Giacinto Di Pietrantonio, “Pinocchio Pipenose Household dilemma,” trans. Gilda Williams, in *Paul McCarthy*, by Ralph Rugoff et al (London: Phaidon, 1996), 93.

<sup>7</sup> Both quoted in Hugh Honour, *Romanticism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 312.

that echoed this mind-set.<sup>8</sup> The child was thus conceptualized as an embodiment of innate human goodness, uncorrupted by society. Implicit in this view was a radical politics, as the return to childhood was linked to the subversion of entrenched conventions and institutions. In “The Art of Unlearning” (1998), Werner Hofmann recognizes this fundamental politics in the art of the period, pointing out that

this call for an artistic turnaround, back to infancy,...belongs to the same revolutionary climate that provoked the destruction of the political traditions at the end of the eighteenth century. For artists, the revocation turns into an instrument of revolutionary rethinking.<sup>9</sup>

In the twentieth century, the aggrandizement of childhood was enhanced by those who turned to actual children’s art for inspiration.<sup>10</sup> For Paul Klee, the child was not only a purer being, but a purer artist too.<sup>11</sup> “I want to be as the new-born,” he proclaimed, “knowing absolutely nothing about Europe.”<sup>12</sup> Klee thus adopted a childlike drawing

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<sup>8</sup> For overview of Romanticism’s exaltation of children, see Werner Hofmann, “The Art of Unlearning,” trans. Christa Knust and Jonathan Fineberg, in *Discovering Child Art: Essays on Childhood, Primitivism and Modernism*, ed. Jonathan Fineberg (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 3-15.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>10</sup> For an overview of twentieth-century artists’ focus on childhood, see “The Child Cult,” by Robert Goldwater, in *Primitivism in Modern Art*, (Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1986). As Goldwater explains, what distinguishes the twentieth century “child cult” from romanticist versions is that the former “are inspired by actual forms of children’s art...and its techniques (or lack of technique)” (Goldwater, 214).

<sup>11</sup> Marcel Franciscono, “Paul Klee and Children’s Art,” in *Discovering Child Art: Essays on Childhood, Primitivism and Modernism*, ed. Jonathan Fineberg (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 98.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Klee, quoted in Goldwater, 199. This sentiment was also echoed by Dada artists, who, as Goldwater points out, also saw child art as “direct expression of inner feeling” (Goldwater, 219).

technique (or, more precisely, lack of technique)—a stylistic gambit also aligned with progressive politics. As Robert Goldwater explains in “The Child Cult” (1938), this sensibility essentially consisted of “a recapturing of freshness and innocence, a wish not unlike that of the romantics, but going much further and containing mystical overtones.”<sup>13</sup> Bolstering its link to social change, Klee called for children’s art “to be taken very seriously, more seriously than all the art museums, if we want reform today.”<sup>14</sup>

Jean Dubuffet carried this sentiment into the postwar era. However, his childlike work suggests a formal and psychological brutality that distinguishes it from Klee’s more whimsical images. Upending longstanding conceptions of youthful innocence, Dubuffet’s paintings frequently evoke childhood cruelty and harshness,<sup>15</sup> actually a holdover of the prewar adulation of childhood advanced by numerous surrealists. In his “Manifesto of Surrealism” (1924), for example, André Breton called for a return to the “dangerous territory” of childhood—an “unintegrated” world of monsters and “precious terror.”<sup>16</sup> As Goldwater explains, this deliberate regression was seen as a path to “the

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 199.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Klee, *Tagebücher von Paul Klee 1898-1918*, quoted in Fineberg, 13.

<sup>15</sup> Franciscono, 117.

<sup>16</sup> André Breton, “Manifesto of Surrealism” in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Ann Arbor Paperbacks, 1972), 40. In 1934, this view materialized in a collaborative publication on the patricidal adolescent Violette Nozières, featuring poems by Breton and E. L. T. Mesens and images by Man Ray, Jean Arp, Victor Brauner, Salvador Dalí and René Magritte. As Laurie J. Monahan explains in “Crimes Against Nature: Violette Nozières, Surrealism and Mass Culture” (1999), these artists saw Nozières as “a misunderstood heroine of her time,” her act a courageous form of resistance against the hypocrisy and moral corruption of patriarchal

essentials of human nature as finally revealed by psychology.”<sup>17</sup> Similarly inspired, Dubuffet offered a crude formal style as the embodiment of raw human essence. Despite the shift in tone, both he and his surrealists predecessors thus retained the romantic conception of the “natural” child, envisioned as a preeminent force against culture

As Hofmann points out, all of these infantilisms were, despite their differences, founded upon an invented conception of childhood, one derived from the basic modernist dialectic of nature versus culture. The juvenile “naïveté” espoused by two centuries of artists is, Hofmann argues, simply a cultural construct in the guise of nature.<sup>18</sup> Rudolf Arnheim echoes this contention in “Beginning with the Child” (1998). Recognizing that modern artists who embraced children’s art “relied on precepts, interpretations and connotations that had little to do with the states of mind producing those unassuming pictures,” Arnheim similarly recasts it as an exercise in myth-making.<sup>19</sup>

This assertion underlies the child-oriented work of Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon. Explicitly rejecting its idealization, these artists present childhood not as a fanciful alternative to “asphyxiating culture,” as Dubuffet put it,<sup>20</sup> but as the very foundation of that culture. In a 1991 interview, Kelley articulates this position, claiming

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society (Laurie J. Monahan, “Crimes Against Nature: Violette Nozières, Surrealism and Mass Culture” *Collapse*, v. 4, 1999, 73-74).

<sup>17</sup> Goldwater, 218.

<sup>18</sup> Hofmann, 6-13.

<sup>19</sup> Rudolf Arnheim, “Beginning with the Child,” in *Discovering Child Art: Essays on Childhood, Primitivism and Modernism*, ed. Jonathan Fineberg (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 15.

<sup>20</sup> Jean Dubuffet, *Asphyxiating Culture and Other Writings* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1988).

that “the whole modernist cult of the child, in which the child was seen as a this innocent figure of pure, unsocialized creativity...is a crock of shit, and is part of the problem, not part of the solution.”<sup>21</sup> Following this logic, these artists deliberately make use of childish behavior, expressions and representations in ways that force a conflict between notions of childhood righteousness and the abundant evidence to the contrary. They effectively reframe the discourse itself, replacing the nature-culture opposition with a concept of nature *as* culture. Their work involves not a recuperation of the romantic convention, but a direct assault on its core precepts.

Seen within its broader social context, this contrarious brand of artistic regression also stands in stark contrast to more contemporaneous glorifications of childhood, with the sixties counterculture again serving as a primary target. The very notion of a youth movement presumes a special status for young people—as implicit in Abbie Hoffman’s caution not to trust anyone over thirty. Indeed, of the many romanticisms that made up the counterculture and its varied progeny, it is the idealized (and politicized) notion of adolescence that unites them all. Roszak thus extolled America’s young people for providing “the saving vision our endangered civilization requires.”<sup>22</sup> Pinning his hopes for radical change on this vision, he claimed that “it is the young, arriving with eyes that can see the obvious, who must remake the lethal culture of their elders, and who must remake it in desperate haste.” The result would be “the subversion of the scientific world view” and the advent of “a new culture in which the non-intellective capacities of the

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<sup>21</sup> Kelley, “Dirty Toys,” 87.

<sup>22</sup> Roszak, 1.

personality—those capacities that take fire from visionary splendor and the experience of human communion—become the arbiters of the good, the true, and the beautiful.”<sup>23</sup>

This perspective was rooted in the late-fifties and early-sixties writings of theorists such as Norman O. Brown. As discussed in chapter two, Brown saw liberation from sexual repression as the key to personal and social freedom, and his ideas were vital to both the sexual revolution and the counterculture overall. Underlying this theory was a notion of the “innocent” child, plainly posited as an exemplar of unrepressed individualism.<sup>24</sup> By the time of Roszak’s late-sixties overview, this belief had become prevalent. Youth was conceptualized as a bearer of human essence, of natural morality and truth.<sup>25</sup> In this way, the perceived generational conflict between adults and their adolescent children was overlaid with a host of supplemental oppositions: reason versus emotion, intellect versus instinct, technology versus mysticism, and—inevitably—culture versus nature.

At the end of the sixties, however, the implicit link between youth and radical politics was increasingly questioned. In a 1969 article in the *New York Times Magazine*, for example, literary critic Benjamin De Mott noted the abundance of recent writing on the subject, which he saw as fueling “the hugely popular delusion that the central development of the sixties has been the widening of the gap between youth and everybody else.” De Mott suggested that the special status widely afforded to young people was not just overly simplistic, but cynically fabricated, “a handy

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 47-51.

<sup>24</sup> George Boas, *The Cult of Childhood* (Dallas, Texas: Spring Publications, 1966), 70.

<sup>25</sup> Roszak, 62.

formula...provid[ing] a means of organizing events, tastes, gestures.”<sup>26</sup> Around this same time, Daniel Bell similarly challenged the underlying contentions of sixties politics. Specifically targeting Roszak’s terminology, which he saw as concealing the real motives of the student movement, Bell pointed out that

by the end of the 1960s, the new sensibility had been given a name (the counter-culture) and an ideology to go with it. The main tendency of that ideology—though it appeared in the guise of an attack on the ‘technocratic society’—was an attack on reason itself... In place of reason, we were told to give ourselves over to one form or another of pre-rational spontaneity.

Ultimately, Bell argued, this kind of neo-primitivism added up to nothing more than “a longing for the lost gratifications of an idealized childhood.”<sup>27</sup> Despite such realizations, however, youth-based subcultures would not only persist, but flourish in the decades to follow.

Meanwhile, childhood came to be extolled in the name of retrenchment as much as rebelliousness. By the 1980s, its exaltation had become central to the reactionary politics of those bent on rescuing American civilization from the perceived cultural decadence of the 1960s and 70s. The various anti-rock, anti-drug and anti-pornography crusades of the eighties were initiated on behalf of an equally mythologized child—innocent and innately virtuous. Whereas the counterculture had recuperated romantic notions of childhood (much as artists such as Klee and Dubuffet did), conservatives salvaged a very different—though no less dubious—ideal: the conception of the untainted child threatened by a vulgar popular culture. As chronicled by Walter Kendrick in *The*

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<sup>26</sup> Benjamin De Mott, “The Sixties: A Cultural Revolution” (1969), reprinted in *The Cult of Youth in Middle-Class America*, 105.

<sup>27</sup> Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), 143.

*Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture* (1987), this fabled young person was seen as immaculate and vulnerable, and therefore in dire need of protection.<sup>28</sup> Rooted in America's Puritan origins, this view has long been central to the country's cultural politics. Yet, so has the notion of the innately progressive youth, which also has lengthy pedigree in the United States. Traceable back to the colonial period and recognized by some of America's earliest commentators, it culminated in the social theory of John Dewey, whose writings inspired not only the reformist movements of early-twentieth-century but also those of the 1960s.<sup>29</sup> As will be shown, the myth of the innocent child and that of the progressive adolescent both stem from a particularly American cult of youth.

The United States has thus been host to a furor of competing idealizations of childhood. And despite their apparent diversity, nearly all are based upon a notion of youthful purity, posited either as a source of reform or as a cause for restriction. They also rely upon a strict opposition between nature and culture. Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon destabilize these presumptions, producing work that functions against both liberalism and conservatism. In direct opposition to the sixties youth movement, they present adolescence as a time of confusion and contradiction, rather than insight. Meanwhile, they target a more fundamental issue: the glorification of childhood in general. By forcing such fantasies into conflict with reality, their work not only

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<sup>28</sup> Kendrick, 67-94.

<sup>29</sup> In a recent article on the Students for a Democratic Society, Tom Hayden and Dick Flacks thus acknowledge that Dewey's theories were fundamental, for example, to the 1962 SDS manifesto, "The Port Huron Statement" (see "The Port Huron Statement at 40," by Tom Hayden and Dick Flacks, *The Nation*, August 5, 2002, <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20020805/hayden>).

counteracts pervasive parenting and pedagogic norms, it complicates basic conceptions of childhood, adolescence and adulthood—indeed, of human nature itself.

In 1960, psychologist Kenneth Keniston published *The Uncommitted: Alienated Youth in American Society*, a prescient account of the teenage rumblings that would soon blossom into the activism of the ensuing decade. For Keniston, America’s obsession with youth was fundamental to its national identity. “We love our children so well,” he proposed, “because in part we loved our lives as children best.”<sup>30</sup> A generation later, Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon offer an important corrective to this conclusion. These artists suggest that America’s focus on youth is rooted in a false nostalgia. As represented in their work, pre-adult existence—whether infancy or adolescence—is riddled with struggle and paradox, resistant to any form of idealization. Implicit in this work is the notion that Keniston had it wrong: maybe we did not really love our lives as children so much. We’ve just convinced ourselves that we did.

### **The Adolescentization of Dissent**

I STOLE MY SISTER’S BOYFRIEND. IT WAS ALL WHIRLWIND, HEAT,  
AND FLASH. WITHIN A WEEK WE KILLED MY PARENTS AND HIT THE  
ROAD.

A drawing from the 1988 zine, *Pettibon with Strings* (fig. 99), features a stylishly blasé beatnik couple—he with his black turtleneck and arm around his girl; she, equally chic, about to take a drag from a cigarette. They are a sixties archetype, an American

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<sup>30</sup> Kenneth Keniston, *The Uncommitted: Alienated Youth in American Society* (1960), reprinted in *The Cult of Youth in Middle-Class America*, 88.

classic. By the eighties, though, such scenes of smokes, shades and cool car culture had long been drained of the youthful insolence initially associated with them.

Acknowledging this, Pettibon supplements his image with the above quote, granting it a renewed ferocity.

However, the mix of teenage detachment and homicidal violence is so heavy-handed that the visual cliché is only further deflated, treated as a relic from a more naïve time. The exaggerated text disrupts the sense of rebelliousness connoted by the image, exposing it as rather conventional. The specifically female voice enhances this effect, inverting the traditional gender roles that typically underlie such scenes. The standard James-Dean-type “rebel,” whose feminine companion is invariably innocent, passive and virginal, is replaced by an aggressive woman, self-assured and violent. Ultimately, these adolescents are liberated not through rock-and-roll, sexual experimentation or any other stock expression of youthful defiance. Instead, they murder their parents with utter indifference. Sterile by contrast, sixties-style subculture is recast as a safe sublimation of what may really be lurking within the mind of the angst-ridden American teen.

In a drawing from *Capricious Missives* (1983) (fig. 100), the words “Double Suicide” hover above side-by-side portraits of two clean-cut adolescents—exactly the kinds of yearbook-type images propagated by the unsuspecting parents of teen suicides. With their excessively wholesome good looks, Pettibon’s figures are poster-children for misunderstood youth. The work renders the discrepancy between popular conceptions of youth and their more disconcerting realities—between appearance and actuality—so extreme that it turns comical. Rather than taking aim at a particular group, this humor operates against the pervasive idealization of youth in general.

Yet, Pettibon saves his most acerbic critiques for the sixties and its counterculture. Here too, adolescent suicide serves as a harsh reality-check. As they plummet off buildings, his drug-crazed hippies take with them the hopes and dreams of their generation, while accompanying texts wittily lay waste to an array of romantic sixties slogans and their corresponding delusions. These are the “tripping corpses” that lend their name to Pettibon’s most extensive series of zines. Plentiful and nasty, they are metaphors for the self-induced death of the counterculture, satirizing youthful optimism and the faith in young people as harbingers of utopia. A page from *Tripping Corpse 1* (1981) (fig. 101) features a naked girl falling gleefully from a high-rise, her body covered with flower-power patterns.<sup>31</sup> On the way down, she passes a workman painting “TURN ON TUNE IN DROP OUT” in psychedelic-style lettering on the wall. Here is the sixties youth movement as not only inane, but fundamentally self-destructive. Having apparently turned on and tuned in, this protagonist seems to have taken the last part of Timothy Leary’s dictum a bit too literally. With a dopey mix of ecstasy and oblivion on her face, she is typical of the hippie dimwits that populate Pettibon’s counterculture caricatures.

Such drawings are also intentionally anachronistic. The earliest date from the late seventies, a time when the movement to which they allude was already long dead. Their real targets are the youth-based subcultures that continued to thrive in the post-sixties era. Indeed, many of these works were produced at the height of Pettibon’s involvement in the L.A. Hardcore scene. His homicidal and suicidal bohemians undermine the ideological cornerstone of all such movements—the adulation of youth as a

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<sup>31</sup> Storr, ““You Are What You Read,”” 42.

transcendental state of being, a wellspring of righteousness and enlightenment. Locating the breakdown of this myth in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Pettibon offers the hippie as both its most egregious embodiment and a symbol of its extinction. More effective because they are so obviously outdated, his tripping corpses historicize—and thus antique—the idealization of youth, along with the hopes for political and social change pinned to it. Pettibon presents this defunct idealization as a casualty of the counterculture’s eminent downfall, the rapid decline from Woodstock to Altamont, from psychedelia to overdose, from illusion to disillusion.

Such critiques had and continue to have broad implications for American popular culture. Indeed, this glorification of youth is not only a product of the contemporary era, but a defining feature of it. While the ascent of adolescent subcultures following World War II firmly established “youth” as a self-contained social contingent, adolescence likewise came to be recognized as an autonomous life-stage, distinct from both childhood and adulthood. Profoundly affecting everything from education to commerce to psychology, this new categorization is what made the counterculture of the sixties and early seventies initially possible. It set the stage for what Theodore Roszak called the “adolescentization of dissent,”<sup>32</sup> the romanticized view of the power of youth—liberated by sex, drugs and rock-and roll—to revolutionize all aspects of society. The contention that adolescents were uniquely capable of tapping innately virtuous childhood instincts and exploiting them for political ends complemented the rise of youth-based subcultures, granting lofty purpose to otherwise capricious trends.

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<sup>32</sup> Roszak, 41.

Though such movements have not been limited to the United States, this particular formula is quintessentially American. In fact, the teenager as we know him today is largely a US invention. Kenneth Keniston recognized this as early as 1960, referring to adolescence as a distinctly American period of “socially supported alienation.”<sup>33</sup> Though it crystallized in the postwar period, the exaltation of this in-between stage of development had been anticipated by a number of early twentieth century advocates. In *Youth and Life* (1913), for example, Progressivist Randolph Bourne defined “youth” as not only distinct from childhood, but uniquely conducive to reform. Bourne argued that adolescence—which he considered innately aligned with freedom, adventure, love, independence, experimentation and radical thought—is a force inherently opposed to the traditions of “artificial civilization.” Young people, he claimed, “interpret what they see freshly and without prejudice; their vision is always the truest, and their interpretation always the justest.” Therefore,

Youth...has no right to be humble. The ideals it forms will be the highest it will ever have, the insight the clearest, the ideas the most stimulating. The best that it can hope to do is to conserve those resources, and keep its flame of imagination and daring bright.<sup>34</sup>

Fueled by the ascendant force of adolescent-based culture, the youth movements of the sixties were the ultimate manifestations of Bourne’s mythopoeic assertion. Since then, popular conceptions of youth have become more multifarious, yet no less idealistic. Despite the failings of the counterculture, the implicit correlation between youth and reform remained fixed in America’s collective consciousness, continuing through the

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<sup>33</sup> Keniston, 82, 87.

<sup>34</sup> Randolph Bourne, *Youth and Life* (1913), reprinted in *The Cult of Youth in Middle-Class America*, 47-49.

1980s and beyond. This not only fed the rudimentary politics of subcultures that, whether they knew it or not, were basically offshoots of their 1960s predecessors. It also motivated a new group of young people who, in reaction against the sixties, championed Reaganomics and personal materialism as the latest revolution.<sup>35</sup> In a 1982 article titled “A Degree of Conformity,” journalist Brian Moynahan charts this ideological inversion. Having visited Berkeley, California—the former hotbed of counterculture activity—he notes that

there are flower children still around, but they have become teachers. Thus the hippies represent the older generation. “Sure, we got freaks here,” said a neatly-coiffed law student in blazer and grey flannels. “They’re all on the staff.” He has as much affection for them as they had for policemen. “Aging creeps.”<sup>36</sup>

Though completely at odds with youth movements of the past, the struggle for change was still cast in terms of a generation gap—this time between ex-hippie baby-boomers and their neo-conservative children. Still prized as a source of transformative vision and innovation, youth was here evoked in support of a return to reason and pragmatism, common sense and traditional values.

Targeting the romanticization of youth itself, Pettibon’s work operates against this reactionary cultural politics as much as it does against its more progressive counterparts. His drawings unleash a sweeping assault on a core myth embraced by both Right and the

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<sup>35</sup> As James Combs points out in *The Reagan Range*, “[The] identification of the young...with Reagan was so extensive that, ironically, the much-discussed ‘generation gap’ of the 1960s (‘You can’t trust anyone over thirty’) now was reversed: veterans of the 1960s didn’t trust their own conservative and self-regarding children and bitterly denounced their alleged lack of altruism, compassion and intellectual interest” (Combs, 88).

<sup>36</sup> Brian Moynahan, “A Degree of Conformity,” *Sunday Times Magazine* (August 1, 1982): 20.

Left. In Pettibon's works, adolescence is presented as a state of contradiction and confusion, not reducible to any singular essence. Some, like his teen suicide images, undercut the notion of youth as inherently clear-sighted and self-assured. Others, such as the numerous rock-and-roll parodies, neutralize the reformist sensibility so often attributed to youth by characterizing it as thoroughly benign—as fickle, faddish and fundamentally conformist. With stinging humor, all of these works caricature the very notion of youth as an exalted condition.

Kelley's aforementioned rock satire, *Pansy Metal/Clovered Hoof*, similarly impugns reductive conceptions of youth that pervade popular culture. And, as with Pettibon, Kelley's approach is rooted in the artist's early career. Like the mid-seventies musical mockeries produced by Destroy All Monsters, works such as *Junior High Notebook Cover* (1984) (fig. 102) sap the subversiveness from youth-based subculture. An all-over composition of Bic-pen-blue doodles, this painting includes the names of some of Detroit's most militant bands from the late 1960s and early 1970s—the SRC, the Amboy Dukes, the MC5—embellished by checkerboard patterns, paisleys and spooky ornamentations. Alongside these hand-scrawled logos and psychedelic frill are the letters KCUF, which may seem like another acronym for a band or a radio station—that is, until it is read in reverse.

Depicting these references as products of the same teenage mentality, Kelley effectively draws equivalences between them. Shown as neither the radical force championed by its proponents, nor the threat claimed by its detractors, the rock-culture of his childhood is thus downgraded to the level of day-dream trifles and quaint juvenile vulgarisms. The implication is that these bands were about as seditious as the flaming

eyeballs, daggers and spider webs that adorn their names, as defiant as a common expletive spelled backward. Whereas his *Pansy Metal* performance suggested that youth subcultures are more about fashion than revolution, Kelley's *Notebook Cover* reminds us that the setting for this so-called rebellion is not the barricades, but rather the junior high school classroom. As with Pettibon's outdated hippie drawings, this nostalgic bit of teenage ephemera underscores the innocuousness of a music-based counterculture at a time when rock was still being both lauded and maligned for its unruliness. More generally, the work undercuts inflated perceptions of youth overall. Awash in puerilism, its music and imagery are presented as hackneyed expressions of ordinary adolescent insolence.

Kelley's *Reconstructed History* series (1989) effects a similar demythologization of youth. Here, fifty black and white textbook illustrations are inelegantly defaced by scatological scribbles and pornographic interpolations. In one, Alexander Hamilton asks Thomas Jefferson to sniff his blackened finger, in response to which the latter vomits (fig. 103). In "Franklin Signing the Treaty of Alliance" (fig. 104), the depicted ceremony is rudely interrupted by an onlooker's superhuman-sized penis laid out across the table. America's great heroes—colonials and pilgrims, Founding Fathers, New World explorers and noble Indians—are thus reduced to a raving bunch of pedophiles, homosexuals and coprophiliacs. The dry factuality of the original images and their sober captions sets the profanity of Kelley's add-ons in sharp relief. And, as with his *Notebook Cover*, it is difficult to tell if he produced the scribbles himself, or merely appropriated them. Striking a perfect balance between crudeness and lewdness, they seem uncannily authentic. They are also undeniably familiar. The pride of novice teenage vandals, such

graffiti is a ubiquitous presence in school libraries everywhere. Kelley's filthy flourishes are eminently nostalgic. Anticipating this nostalgia, he uses it to force a confrontation with the adolescent impulses embodied by these obscenities. In an article titled "Primitive Art" (1930)—an early critique of the popular romanticization of children's art—Georges Bataille identifies such unwholesome impulses in the "dirty scribbling" of youngsters. These spontaneous deformations are, Bataille explains, unabashed expressions of the destructive desires and sadistic instincts of youth.<sup>37</sup> As signs of a sexuality that is both perverse and juvenile, Kelley's faux-graffiti renders this assertion explicit.

This similarly informs Kelley's *Three-Point Program/Four Eyes* (1987) (fig. 105), a felt banner from his "Half of Man" series. Applied to an enormous range of work, "Half a Man" has numerous connotations, and Kelley deliberately keeps the term ambiguous. Here, however, it refers to one who is no longer a child, but not quite an adult—that is, the teenager. Recalling championship banners hung from the rafters in high school gyms, this hand-cut placard improbably boasts:

PANTS SHITTER  
&  
PROUD  
P.S.  
*JERK –*  
*OFF*  
TOO  
(AND I WEAR GLASSES)

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<sup>37</sup> Georges Bataille, "Primitive Art," in *Primitivism in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art: A Documentary History*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California, 2003), 227-29.

Unabashedly pathetic, this tactless message is at odds with the work's bold, white-on-black lettering and triumphal design. Producing a clash between wholesome form and sordid content, it exemplifies Kelley's strategy of "foul perfection."

Like the *Notebook Cover* and *Reconstructed History* series, this retardation proclamation rejoices in adolescent vulgarity, openly contradicting notions of youthful purity. It likewise counteracts the modern conception of the youth as an assured agent of cultural progress. Both edifices crumble in the face of Kelley's "adolescent supernerd," as Ralph Rugoff calls him.<sup>38</sup> Proclaiming his own perversity, this protagonist is a self-styled paragon of un-coolness, an incontinent, four-eyed chronic wanker—and proud of it. Wallowing in a state of infantile regression, he is a child living uncomfortably in an adult body, truly half a man.<sup>39</sup>

This view of adolescence dates back to Kelley's own teenage years. It both motivates and permeates the work of Destroy All Monsters, whose anarchic songs are themselves expressions of the psychological chaos of youth. In a mid-seventies spoof titled "Destroy All Monsters Interviews Itself," Kelley acknowledges this, pointing out that "adolescents are the people that are the most confused of all, and if anybody can relate to our confused music, it's adolescents."<sup>40</sup> More recently, he reiterated this idea in a logo for the band's mid-nineties reunion tour (fig. 106). Here, Kelley recycled an acrylic brush drawing he made in 1993 as part of his "Roth/Mouse/Wolverton" series—a tribute to Ed "Big Daddy" Roth, Stanley "Mouse" Miller and Basil Wolverton, three

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<sup>38</sup> Ralph Rugoff, "Mike Kelley/2 and the Power of the Pathetic," in *Catholic Tastes*, 162.

<sup>39</sup> Robert Storr, "What's Not to Like?" *Artforum* XLIII No. 2 (October 2004), 265.

<sup>40</sup> Destroy All Monsters Interviews Itself (reprinted, *DAM*, nd, np).

underground cartoonists from his own childhood—coupling it with the caption “The Spirit of Adolescence.” The work consists of a gangly, pimple-faced monster with eyes bulging out of his head and tongue dangling from his mouth. In “Foul Perfection: Thoughts on Caricature” (1989), Kelley explains that these cartoonists often use such attributes—especially the protruding eyes and tongue—as “genital substitutes,” connoting “extreme states of sexual arousal.”<sup>41</sup> Borrowing this technique, Kelley represents the adolescent as a savage, a grotesque being riddled by uncontrollable bodily urges.

Though humorously exaggerated, this version of adolescence serves as a sardonic corrective to more palatable constructions of youth. Kelley’s depictions implicitly counteract the pervasive tendency to sugarcoat what is actually a deeply conflictive phase of development. Indeed, adolescence is defined by crisis—a fact established by a century of scholarship on the subject.<sup>42</sup> Whereas youths see and present themselves as self-confident and perspicacious, they are in reality plagued by uncertainty and turmoil. Their subcultures thus serve to temporarily assuage what is essentially a dis-integrated adolescent identity.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Kelley, “Foul Perfection,” 29.

<sup>42</sup> This is a core contention of American social psychologist Erik Erikson, whose landmark analyses offer a perspective closer to that of Kelley than to the various postwar idealizations of youth. In *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (1968), Erikson describes adolescence as “a time when the body changes its proportions radically, when genital puberty floods the body and imagination with all manners of impulses, when intimacy with the other sex approaches and is, on occasion, forced on the young person, and when the immediate future confronts one with too many conflicting possibilities and choices” (Erik H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* [New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1968], 132-33).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

Kelley's "Spirit of Adolescence" cartoon is therefore similar to Pettibon's drawings populated by teenagers teeming with a mix of irrepressible sexuality, confusion and aggression. The latter artist's sixties-era murderers, nymphomaniacs and suicides are exemplary. Just as often, however, Pettibon's drawings address early adolescence—those same junior high school years to which Kelley's *Notebook Cover* and *Reconstructed History* series refer. In a work mentioned in chapter three, for example, a baseball card of first-baseman Ted Kluszewski is coupled with the line, "MY FIRST ORGASM" (fig. 69). This drawing is doubly discomfoting. It links common athlete worship with homoerotic desire, while locating the origin of that desire within an unexpectedly early stage of youth development. The speaker's first orgasm thus coincides not with the usual signs of sexual maturity, but with baseball-card collecting—that eminently nostalgic paradigm of boyhood innocence.

A similar discordance is evoked by an untitled Pettibon drawing from 1985 (fig. 107), in which a pubescent girl stands against a wall with her arm raised over her head. Dressed only in panties, she awkwardly attempts a provocative pose, cigarette perched between her lips. "THIRTEEN," is emblazoned above her; "GOING ON FOURTEEN" reads the follow-up caption along the bottom—an amendment of the cliché "thirteen, going on thirty." Typically used to describe a child sexually sophisticated beyond her years, the original saying implies that the normal adolescent is sexless; prematurely corrupted by sex, she becomes perversely adult-like. By replacing "thirty" with "fourteen," however, Pettibon contrarily suggests that this topless schoolgirl is right on schedule, that such behavior is in line with her budding desires and natural curiosity—

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which, in fact, it is. As with the baseball-card drawing, one's uneasiness before this work—that it is instinctively rejected it as kiddie-porn, even though nothing about the scene renders it necessarily such—confirms a continued ambivalence toward the prospect of early teen sexuality. By portraying adolescence in all its ungainly glory, Pettibon restores the imperspicuity and inelegance routinely whitewashed by sentimental constructs of youth.

Along with his unhinged hippies, nearly all of the artist's relentless rock-and-roll send-ups serve this broader agenda. An untitled drawing from 1986 (fig. 108), for example, features a punk-rocker silhouette and his rambling confessional:

WHEN I WANT TO GET A GUY'S ATTENTION I FLIP MY CIGARETTE AT HIM. WITH THAT WE EITHER FUCK OR FIGHT—WHICH ONE I'D RATHER DO I DON'T KNOW. OR RATHER, I DON'T CARE. EITHER. THEY'RE BOTH BORING. FUCKING IS JUST A WAY TO MEET GUYS, ESPECIALLY IF THEY'RE IN A BAND. YOU HOPE TO BE SEEN (TOGETHER) AFTERWARDS...

A work from a year earlier (fig. 109) offers a similar take, this time from a teenage girl's perspective. Shown diving across the picture frame, she explains:

SOMETIMES YOU GOT TO BE SUPER-AGGRESSIVE OR YOU'RE LOST. ONE TIME I REACHED BACKSTAGE AND GRABBED [ROCK STAR] SAMMY HAGAR'S BALLS, AND I GOT TO SPEND THE NIGHT.

On a page from *New Wave Gravy 2* (1985)—a zine that includes some of Pettibon's harshest caricatures of L.A.'s Hardcore scene—two gawky boys sit side-by-side on a bed, nervously discussing their plan (fig. 110):

'Shall we listen to hard rock? Your parents won't hear us having sex over the noise.' 'That won't do. My mom will com in and ask me to turn it down. We'd be naked.' 'Yeah, but I really don't want to hear any of that mushy stuff.'

There are an abundance of these drawings, all equally crass. Each operates against pro-rock radicalism and anti-rock alarmism—both of which advance inflated notions of youth

culture. Instead, they suggest that the teenage rock fan is motivated not by any coherent political program or rebellious intention, but by much less noble aims—to mask one’s homosexual experimentation, for example, or to sleep (or fight) with a member of the band.

Both Pettibon and Kelley thus employ adolescence as a vehicle of dissent. Yet, these artists actively resist the contrived “adolescentization of dissent” propagated by previous generations. Their work signals a deflation of youth, rather than its idealization. In this sense, the numerous rock-based subcultures of the sixties, seventies and beyond are perfect targets, for it is within and upon them that such idealizations of youth routinely converge. (Indeed, arguably the musical perversities of Kelley, McCarthy, Pettibon and their post-sixties brethren are also directed against this paradigm. They too present and embrace adolescence as an anti-ideal.)

Though McCarthy does not focus on adolescence per se, his buffoonish performance techniques and vulgar humor are themselves frequently described as adolescent. As curator Lisa Phillips acknowledges, the artist’s work “is often misunderstood or denigrated as adolescent misbehavior when it is so much more.”<sup>44</sup> While Phillips’s defense is commendable, it is actually a bit off the mark; McCarthy’s misbehavior is indeed adolescent, and intentionally so. Like the fictitious author of Kelley’s banner, his characters disrupt cultural norms by jerking off and shitting their pants. For all three artists, the teenager is conceived not as a wellspring of positive energy, visionary insight and progressive ideals, but as a profoundly unwholesome

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<sup>44</sup> Quoted in “The Mechanical Id,” by Hunter Drohojowska-Philp, *Artnet*, November 14, 2000 (<http://www.artnet.com/Magazine/features/drohojowska-philp/drohojowska-philp11-14-00.asp>).

being—a half-child/half-adult hybrid, dictated by faddish whim, regressive imprudence and uncontrollable hormonal drives. Depicting more accurate views of youth, they effectively bring it down from its lofty perch. But, these artists also rescue it from its persistent over-simplification. Those oh-so-memorable teenage years are thus shown to be both more inane and more complex than typically assumed.

### **Plushophilia**

This realization underlies Kelley's *Ahh, Youth!* (1991) (fig. 111), a work which includes a photograph of the artist himself as a teenager. All the conflicts and insecurities of adolescence are written on his greasy, pimply face, cruelly preserved in a yearbook-like portrait. Kelley's miserable mug is an irrefutable retort against countless idealizations of youth; it alone is enough to make one pause before longing for their own high school years. Yet, Kelley's pathetic portrait is only one of eight images that make up *Ahh, Youth!* The other seven are similarly-posed photographs of tattered stuffed animals collected from thrift stores. The artist thus aligns the teenager with these worn out childhood toys. Like the decrepit doll, he is out of place—no longer fit for childhood, but not yet an adult. (The mug-shot format of these photographs emphasizes this outcast status.) The acned adolescent and the soiled toy are both embodiments of blemished ideals. They are both literally and figuratively dirty.<sup>45</sup>

One of the last of Kelley's stuffed-animal works, *Ahh, Youth!* is a finale to that artist's extensive body of thrift-store arrangements. More typically, these consist of dolls provocatively positioned on used blankets, afghans or tablecloths. Such works evoke

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<sup>45</sup> Gordon, 180.

modern junk sculpture and assemblage. However, whereas previous artists have sought either to elevate refuse to art status—essentially an exercise in high-low inversion—or to romanticize it as an homage to decay, loss or death, Kelley’s arrangements amplify the original cultural significance of his found objects.<sup>46</sup> Perched on their cozy coverlets, the stuffed animals are inevitably nostalgic—the result not of Kelley’s manipulation, but of the already-established social functions and ideals of childhood embodied by these things. Reframing the toys in ways that clash with their initially intended use, Kelley forces a reconsideration of those very functions and ideals.

The layouts themselves contradict the overtly inanimate nature and puerile origins of their components. Kelley taps one’s inclination to personify these objects, generating an unanticipated emotional potency from otherwise absurd configurations of dilapidated dolls and old, ratty blankets. The effect, as Kelley explains, is inescapable:

The funny thing about dolls is you don’t notice their scale because you project into them. Your relationship is sort of an interior one, a mental one. No matter how fucked up it is, you look at the doll and you see this lump of material as human, totally ignoring its material nature.<sup>47</sup>

Viewers are, in this sense, infantilized. Like children, they intuitively project human characteristics and rudimentary storylines onto these arrangements, animating the toys

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<sup>46</sup> Kelley thus contrasts his work with that of previous assemblage artists: “My work is perched between these nostalgic assemblage artists on the one side and this classical commodity art on the other side. It’s not about idealization” (Mike Kelley, “Toying with Second-Hand Souvenirs,” interview with Paul Taylor, *Flash Art*, no. 154 (Oct. 1990), reprinted in *Mike Kelley* (Cantz), 58); “What I wanted was to have something that was worn but not nostalgic. That was my problem, because in the tradition of most modern art things worn becomes a cypher [sic] for time. In almost all junk sculpture past dada that’s true. It’s even true in surrealism. Worn things become a metaphor for [nostalgia]” (Kelley, interview with John Miller, 19).

<sup>47</sup> Kelley, “Dirty Toys,” 86.

and investing them with psychological and intellectual attributes.<sup>48</sup> Kelley's creatures appear to be conversing and interacting, participants in elaborate social situations, odd rituals and performances.

*Arena 5* (1990) (fig. 112) consists of a large yellow blanket, on which two E.T. dolls look down upon the stiff, supine corpse of a second alien species.<sup>49</sup> Another smushy E.T. slumps sadly in the opposite corner, isolated from his extraterrestrial brethren, barred from participating in their examination. The formality of the work's design—its symmetry and balance—lends a compositional sophistication to the overall scene, imparting an unexpected intentionality to the figures' poses and a complexity to their relationships to each other. The "arena" is thus pregnant with narrative meaning, albeit of a perpetually ambiguous nature. As a world unto itself, it seems to possess a distinct internal logic. Individually, these dolls are simply movie mementos; arranged together, they suggest a structured community—enigmatic, but cohesive and complex.

Kelley thus assembles these playthings into grown-up social patterns that seem foreign to the freewheeling fantasies of childhood. Not only are the *Arenas* clearly the work of an adult, but the strange fictions they connote are also distinctly un-childlike. Each implies a world organized by fixed behavioral rules, systematized rites and deliberate acts—bizarre, yet familiar in their apparent conventionality. This is true even

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<sup>48</sup> "Generally," Kelley explains, "I believe that small figurative objects invite the viewer to project onto them. By this, I mean that the viewer gets lost in these objects, and that in the process of projecting mental scenarios onto them they lose sense of themselves physically" (Mike Kelley, "Playing with Dead Things: On the Uncanny" (1993), reprinted in *Foul Perfection*, 67).

<sup>49</sup> E.T. is the protagonist of the film *E.T. the Extraterrestrial* (directed by Steven Spielberg, 1982).

of Kelley's most simple arrangements. In *Arena #3 (Green Circle)* (1990), for example, two stuffed heads—likely detached from more complete figures—gape at each other from opposite ends of a green tablecloth. Though the permanent immobility of the pair forever keeps them apart, their fixated stares bind them emotionally and psychologically. Like star-crossed lovers, they yearningly gaze across an unbridgeable abyss.

Kelley's ability to elicit such pathos from these patently ridiculous assemblages testifies to the resilience of the personifying instinct, which clearly is not confined to childhood play. Indeed, the discomfiting effects of these works are caused by the clash between adult sentiments—eros, pity, disgust, dread—and manifestly infantile forms. *Innards* (1990) (fig. 113) demonstrates that this tendency to anthropomorphize endures even when the items are barely humanoid. Strewn over a plain white blanket, this scattering of knit doll scraps is read as intestines, brain-matter and other ghastly globs of bloody viscera. Despite their fragmentary state, these torn plaything parts become indicators of horrific violence.

In fact, a number of the *Arenas* suggest tales of brutality and bloodshed, in sharp contrast with the supposed saccharine sweetness of their plush protagonists. *Arena #2 (Kangaroo)* (1990) (fig. 114), contains a decapitated kangaroo—head dangling from a protracted, blue-and-white-knit spinal column—beside two hugging bears. The butchery effectively negates the warm nostalgia the toys are meant to elicit.<sup>50</sup> This is the case not just with the massacred marsupial, but with the embracing teddies as well. Though intact, the latter are effectively transformed from a symbol of loving tenderness to one of trembling fear.

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<sup>50</sup> Rugoff, "Mr. McCarthy's Neighborhood," 166.

These works thus make clear the crucial importance of context—which, when cleverly adjusted, can turn cuddliness into abhorrence, cuteness into carnage. By manipulating childhood objects in this way, Kelley exhibits the instability of their meanings. His displacements effect a grotesque coexistence of opposites, in which the cultural significance of these objects remains, even as their connotations are distorted. In fact, the works depend on the recognition of that original purpose. The resulting clash of forms and content operates anthropologically, accentuating the social values woven into these simple lumps of yarn, fabric and stuffing.

Kelley's assemblages are, in this sense, less about childhood than they are about its representation in adult culture. As the artist explains, "all this stuff is produced by adults for children, expressing adult ideas about the reality of children. The children are totally absent from the production process except as designated consumers."<sup>51</sup> By placing juvenile objects into improbably mature scenarios, Kelley draws attention to their conventional roles—to the fact that these things are ordinarily read as symbols of childlike innocence and purity. Each stuffed doll on display reflects the desire to see children not as they are, but as adults would prefer them to be. "The stuffed animal is a pseudo-child," to quote Kelley, "a cutified...being that represents the adult's perfect model of a child."<sup>52</sup>

This idealization is inscribed in the basic formal qualities of the toys displayed in these works. With their characteristically large heads, squat torsos and small limbs,

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<sup>51</sup> Kelley, "Dirty Toys," 87.

<sup>52</sup> Mike Kelley, "Three Projects," *Minor Histories*, 14-15.

stuffed animals typically conform to the proportions of a baby.<sup>53</sup> This correlation is enhanced by the soft and fuzzy materials, affectionate gestures and adorable faces that are also standard attributes. As Kelley suggests, they are representations of the child as paragon of cuteness and cuddliness, perpetually happy and with an unlimited capacity to give and receive affection. Yet, as with most idealizations, what is excluded from such playthings also divulges much about their underlying purpose. Without exception, these pseudo-children have no genitals—the most conspicuous indicator of their staunch sexlessness. In certain of the *Arenas*, Kelley draws attention to this anomaly by arranging his toys in distinctly sexual scenarios. *Arena #10 (Dogs)* (1990) (fig. 115), for example, consists of a long rectangular afghan, on which two stuffed critters—a small walrus perched atop a beanbag face—preside over a procession of six autograph dogs and a door-snake, lined up back-to-front. Preteen mementos and handmade keepsakes are thus transformed into a comical scene of animal voyeurism and humping hounds—all doing it “doggy-style.”

All of Kelley’s doll arrangements seem tainted by similarly unseemly traces of sexuality. Used and discarded, the toys he has collected are not only raggedy, but defiled. The physical touching and rubbing implied by these splotches are inevitably perceived as signs of sexual deviance. As Rugoff puts it, “these icons of childhood have been molested by adult male hands and besmirched by adult imagination.”<sup>54</sup> Yet, in truth, Kelley has done next to nothing to the dolls themselves. Other than gathering and

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<sup>53</sup> As Kelley himself has explained, “The stuffed animal is a model of a baby; the proportions of it are the same as that of a baby” (Mike Kelley, “Black Nostalgia,” 53).

<sup>54</sup> Rugoff, “Mr. McCarthy’s Neighborhood,” 163-5.

arranging them in ways that highlight their attributes, he has fully preserved their found-object condition. Thus, the blemishes they exhibit are the results of normal use, rather than abuse. In the course of routine play, children shamelessly chew, squeeze and drool on their toys, happy to leave them caked with bodily fluids, food and feculence. The grubby surfaces are therefore as ordinary and benign as the collected playthings themselves. Nonetheless, as Kelley recognizes, “the worn and dirty condition of the toys [is] read, not as the result of child’s play, but as a symbol of adult mistreatment of children. The toys [become] sculptures of abused children.”<sup>55</sup> Transferred from the crib to the gallery, they turn perverse, as normal wear and tear are read as marks of sexual corruption. Frayed spots thus become evidence of groping, stains become ejaculate, and threadbare patches become marks of violation. In direct conflict with the flawless and sexless child they are meant to represent, the dirty doll stands as a defiled idealization, another embodiment of “foul perfection.”

Foregrounding this defilement, the *Arenas* underscore the irrepressible cultural significance of these objects and the values they maintain—values wholly incompatible with filth, both literal and metaphoric.<sup>56</sup> The urge to project lures the viewer in, fostering a prefatory emotional connection to the objects. Thus invested, one is effectively

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<sup>55</sup> Mike Kelley, “Architectural Non-Memory Replaced with Psychic Reality” (1996), reprinted in *Minor Histories*, 320.

<sup>56</sup> As Kelley explains, “my intention in these works was to present the objects as adult products and to raise questions about their formal construction in relation to their social use” (Kelley, “Architectural Non-Memory,” 320).

trapped. And the dirt, rips and stains can then perform their de-romanticizing roles.<sup>57</sup> As Kelley describes,

In these works I played the inclination to project into the figures, to construct an inner narrative around them, against the viewer's awareness of his or her own physical presence. This self-consciousness was produced by using extremely worn and soiled craft materials. The viewer's immediate tendency to be sucked into a narrativizing situation is repelled when he or she gets close enough to sense the unpleasant tactile qualities of the craft materials. Fear of becoming soiled counters the urge to idealize.<sup>58</sup>

Stuck between cleanliness and contamination, purity and taboo, viewers must confront their own conditioned responses to these reductive forms.

This effect is also central to the work of McCarthy, who as usual, performs as the contaminator himself. Rather than arranging second-hand objects, he assumes the role of the slovenly child, shamelessly sullyng everything in his path. *Mother Pig* (1983) (fig. 116) and *Popeye, Judge and Jury* (1983) are just two of the many works in which McCarthy's adult characters engage in the methodical soiling of toys. Indeed, nearly all of his debaucheries involve a conscious regression to pre-anal existence—with dolls, stuffed animals and other childhood creatures serving as the focus of these infantile enactments. As Phillips puts it, "playing out allegories and narrative commentaries on American dreams and values through such archetypal characters as Santa Claus, Cowboys and Indians of the Wild West, Pinocchio, Heidi, Mr. Potato Head, Popeye, and

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<sup>57</sup> As Kelley explains, "I try to present the wear and decay of the prototype and not romanticize it, because there's nothing I hate more than romantic, nostalgic art" (Kelley, "Toying with Second-Hand Souvenirs," 58).

<sup>58</sup> Mike Kelley, "In the Image of Man," in *Mike Kelley 1985-1996*, by José Lebrero Stals et al (Barcelona: Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 1997), 68.

Olive Oyl, cherished childhood icons are reinvisioned and adulterated with an unsettling ambivalence about the innocence of childhood.”<sup>59</sup>

In a series titled *PROPO* (1992), McCarthy documented the abundance of besmirched playthings featured in two decades of orgiastic performances. The artist unearthed these objects, dense with crud, from the trunks and cases that had housed them, photographing each individually. The result is a group of enormous portraits of desecrated childhood forms. These include a grimy female doll standing defiantly, hands on her hips and a large phallus between her legs (fig. 117), a headless male body with shorts slipping provocatively off his waist, and a rubber Donald Duck coated in brown muck. The colossal scale of the photographs (each is over five-and-a-half feet tall) render these objects at once comical and menacing, while affording an opportunity for close, in-your-face examination. With suggestions of sexuality, violence and debasement, their disturbing effects are very similar to those of Kelley’s contemporaneous toy-assemblages.

Once again, the uneasiness experienced before such works reveals how invested society is in these common creatures—that they are potent objects of fantasy, for the adult as much as the child. Sustaining basic ideas of proper parent-child relations, their physical qualities are determined by the willful denial of childhood sexuality. The insistence on infantile sexlessness makes cuddling, caressing, and loving the child uncomplicated and comfortable. As Freud explained as early as 1905, this is nothing more than a convenient delusion:

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<sup>59</sup> Lisa Phillips, “Paul McCarthy’s Theater of the Body,” *New Museum*, 3.

A child's intercourse with anyone responsible for his care affords him an unending source of sexual excitation and satisfaction from his erotogenic zones. This is especially so since the person in charge of him, who, after all, is as a rule his mother, regards him with feelings that are derived from her own sexual life: she strokes him, kisses him, rocks him and quite clearly treats him as a substitute for a complete sexual object.<sup>60</sup>

Such incestuous interaction is not only normal, but necessary to the psychological development of the individual; through it, the child learns how to be an affectionate, sexually healthy adult.<sup>61</sup> The neutered plaything effectively masks this natural—but disconcerting—relationship.

Re-infusing these forms with sexuality, McCarthy and Kelley exploit this repressed parent-child eroticism. The extreme uneasiness such objects elicit is a byproduct of one's self-protective need to safeguard the myth of childhood purity and innocence. It is a testament to how sacred the ideal of a clean, sexless child is. Once pawed and smudged, the dolls are seen as representations of violated children—as pedophilic sculptures—despite that fact that, to babies, these soiled things are not only normal, but intensely desirable. The perceived depravity is entirely imaginary, a projection triggered by Kelley's crafty arrangements and McCarthy's orgiastic rituals. Viewer are stuck in uncomfortable situations caused only by their salacious thoughts and the reflexive denial of those thoughts. As silly as they seem, these works are deeply discomfiting because they make us all feel like perverts.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, 89.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 91-94.

<sup>62</sup> This sensation is often deflected from the viewer onto the artist, thus scapegoated as sick or depraved. As Kelley himself has observed,

Yet, if anyone it is the child that is the so-called pervert here. For the groping, gnawing and rubbing connoted by these second-hand stuffed animals are not really “innocent” at all. They are acts of sensual gratification, which is what children most often use their plush toys for. As Kelley points out,

for the very young child, a stuffed animal is not simply a model of some agreeable object, a friendly animal or an object to weave fantasies around, like a doll. It is primarily a tactile object associated with great physical pleasure. It is *very* present.<sup>63</sup>

Freud verifies this in his analysis of the “oral stage” of development, when chewing and sucking satisfy the infant’s hearty “erotogenic” desires.<sup>64</sup> The potency of these shabby toys is therefore not just in what they suggest, but in what they actually are. As an idealized representation of the child that also serves as a sexual object for children, the dirty doll is profoundly paradoxical—a contradiction in terms. Its stains and tatters evidence the sexuality that its sanitized form is intended to deny.<sup>65</sup>

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In order to explain my supposed fascination with abuse, viewers also tended to project onto me—the maker of these objects—some presumed historical trauma. They could not allow that my artistic role in relation to these loaded objects was analytical; there must be a “true” psychological—and pathological—connection between my materials and me. I was viewed as an infantilist, possibly a pedophile, or victim of abuse myself (Kelley, “Architectural Non-Memory,” 320).

By thus implicating the artist, these viewers avert a confrontation with relevant social meanings—meanings that implicate the culture as a whole, themselves included.

<sup>63</sup> Kelley, “Playing with Dead Things,” 67.

<sup>64</sup> Freud’s developmental stages are most succinctly laid out in the “Infantile Sexuality” chapter of his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, 39-72.

<sup>65</sup> Of course, it is Freud who most notably affirmed that children are inherently sexual beings in the first place. Yet, he was also troubled by the pervasive tendency to renounce this reality:

Such is the case with the sense of childhood violence underlying the work of Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon. Fervent physical aggression—evidenced in everything from playful romping around to more blatant sadomasochistic activities—is fully present in young children, who energetically indulge in such urges because they essentially lack the sentiment of pity.<sup>66</sup> “Cruelty in general,” Freud concludes, “comes easily to the childish nature,” dominating the earliest stages of childhood sexuality.<sup>67</sup> Though these ideas were recognized over a century ago, the widespread denial of them persists—so much so that its numerous manifestations hardly need to be rehearsed. Despite modern advances in education, child rearing and sexuality in general, the notion of the child as a complex psychological being, with robust violent and sexual drives, remains controversial. Society continues to cling to an ideal of the innocent and pure child—sexless, amiable and inherently good. The shock-effects of Kelley’s stuffed animal sculptures and McCarthy’s food bacchanals only confirm this.

Arguably, it is American society that is most profoundly invested in this ideal. Central to both the culture of the sixties and its later backlash, this idealization is rooted in a much more deep-seated tradition in America, where youths have not only been mythologized, but, in a sense, overvalued. Americans have long prized their children as

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One feature of the popular view of the sexual instinct is that it is absent in childhood and only awakens in the period of life described as puberty. This, however, is not merely a simple error but one that has grave consequences, for it is mainly to this idea that we owe our present ignorance of the fundamental conditions of sexual life (Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, 39).

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 58-59, 64, 68-69.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 59.

harbingers of future social and cultural progress—an idea that has extended across the political spectrum. In *The Cult of Childhood* (1966), American intellectual historian George Boas recognizes this. Though his essay traces the phenomenon back to Plato, he notes that, in the United States, “the cult of childhood...has reached amazing proportions.” Indeed, he presents it as fundamental to the mores of American society—evident not only in the character of American education, but in the extreme “love of ‘cuteness’” and prevalence of youth subcultures in the US. According to Boas, in America, “the Child has been held up...as a paradigm of the ideal man.”<sup>68</sup> Historian Richard L. Rapson echoes this idea in his introduction to the anthology, *The Cult of Youth in Middle-Class America* (1971):

To a great extent life in middle-class America centers on the child... Far more than in Europe, the child in America has been exalted; more effort, attention, and hope have been invested in him here than anywhere else in the world.”

And it is not just the radical Left or reactionary Right that has advanced this exaltation. Romanticized childhood has been a cornerstone of mainstream America, which, Rapson contends, has always seen the child as the embodiment of “natural goodness, innocence, and practically unlimited educability.”<sup>69</sup>

This ideal has been essential to the national identity and ideology of the United States since its colonial period.<sup>70</sup> By the time Alexis de Tocqueville wrote *Democracy in*

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<sup>68</sup> Boas, 8-9.

<sup>69</sup> Richard L. Rapson, introduction to *The Cult of Youth in Middle-Class America*, vii-viii.

<sup>70</sup> In *Education in the Forming of American Society* (1960), Bernard Bailyn traces the veneration of youth back to America’s colonial period. The particular economic and social conditions of that era—the hardships of transplanted labor, the need for menial labor, and the prioritization of the nuclear family, as opposed to intricate network of European kinships—made young people critical to success in the New World. Meanwhile,

*America* (1882), the prioritization of childhood had become a distinguishing characteristic of United States society, a primary focus of its institutions and families. Tocqueville saw the special status granted to America's young people as central to the country's democratic ideals. Unlike aristocracies, in which the father rules as the government rules—that is, absolutely—democracies, he observed, prize individuality and independence. American children were therefore encouraged to forge their own views, rather than just conform to traditions handed down by the father.<sup>71</sup> Childhood was seen as a time of limitless potential—set free, according to Tocqueville, by America's lack of authoritarian constraints and parental domination.

This sentiment inspired the American Progressivism movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—a watershed moment in the history of the country's conception of childhood. As Rapson points out, for reformers of this time, “it was an article of faith that the young were essentially capable and good beings.”<sup>72</sup> Any “bad” qualities were seen as the results of external factors that needed to be modified—thus the Progressivist drive to improve the environmental conditions of the nation's young. Their essential objective was to liberate what was seen as the innate righteousness of children. Turn-of-the-century educator Francis Wayland Parker, for

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education was seen as necessary to the maintenance of a stable social structure during uncertain times. As a result of these conditions, Bailyn explains, childhood became a primary focus of early American institutions and families (Bernard Bailyn, *Education in the Forming of American Society* (1960), reprinted in *The Cult of Youth in Middle-Class America*, 4-6).

<sup>71</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (1882), reprinted in *The Cult of Youth in Middle-Class America*, 9.

<sup>72</sup> Rapson, ix-x.

example, proclaimed that “the spontaneous tendencies of the child are the records of inborn divinity.”<sup>73</sup> Psychologist G. Stanley Hall, a leading theorist of education reform at the time, furthered this adulation. According to Hall,

The guardians of the young should strive first of all to keep out of nature’s way... They should feel profoundly that childhood, as it comes fresh from the hands of God, is not corrupt, but illustrates the survival of the most consummate thing in the world... Nothing else is so worthy of love, reverence, and sense as the body and soul of the growing child.<sup>74</sup>

Most important in perpetuating this ideal, however, were the Progressivist theories of John Dewey. In books such as *Democracy and Education* (1916), Dewey presented the child as the key to social progress and reform—an assertion based on an alleged opposition between youth and adulthood. As historian Richard Hofstadter points out in *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (1962), “Dewey saw the process by which a society inculcates the young with its principles, inhibitions, and habits as a kind of imposition on them.” This process, Dewey contended, spoiled the “plasticity” of children—a condition that could be remedied through educational reform.<sup>75</sup>

As Hofstadter makes clear, Dewey’s model was both romantic and primitivist. It was also particularly suited to American culture, with its already-pervasive conception of the child as natural and divine. Though Dewey ultimately sought a harmonious synthesis between youth and society—recognizing the limitations of spontaneous childhood instincts and the need for socialization—his ideas helped institutionalize a rather fixed

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<sup>73</sup> Francis Wayland Parker, quoted in *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (1962), by Richard Hofstadter, reprinted in *The Cult of Youth in Middle-Class America*, 70.

<sup>74</sup> G. Stanley Hall, quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> Hofstadter, 67-77.

antithesis between the two. To many American educators, Dewey's theories mandated complete childhood liberation. This generated a widespread, child-centric approach to reform, in which the "natural" child was pitted against "artificial" society. Because of this crude schematization, Hofstadter explains, "what came to be called progressive education, although often immensely fertile and ingenious concerning means, was so futile and confused about ends."<sup>76</sup> Despite the important advances it prompted, the over-determined opposition between childhood and adulthood neglected the diversity and complexity of children and the nuances of their own social milieu. Nonetheless, as Rapson points out, the popularization of Dewey's ideas spawned "assumptions, intentions and the kind of attitude toward children that dominated American thinking at least until the end of the second world war, and which is still deeply engrained in our consciousness."<sup>77</sup>

Writing in 1971, Rapson explicitly intended to link this ideal to that of the then-present counterculture, confirming Hofstadter's early-sixties claim that Dewey's theories became "a method of institutionalizing the proper anti-institutional methods."<sup>78</sup> However, a romantic conception of childhood has not always been a catalyst for liberation in America.<sup>79</sup> Nor has it necessarily translated into an absolute celebration of youth culture, as it did for theorists like Roszak. Whereas the counterculture unconditionally extolled both, for example, its more conservative critics tended to be

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 68-75.

<sup>77</sup> Rapson, x.

<sup>78</sup> Hofstadter, 78.

<sup>79</sup> Rapson, ix.

more discriminating. To them, the inherently innocent child was unequivocally a victim of popular culture. Contemporary youth movements were thus viewed not as conservators of juvenile goodness, but as both the symptom and cause of an overly permissive society. Indeed, the country's puritan ethos has always been founded on a conception of the innocent child, routinely evoked in the name of prudery and piety.<sup>80</sup> Here, the myth of immaculate youth has justified the discipline of children within restrictive educational and social systems. Considered inherently but precariously chaste, young people have been seen as especially corruptible, vulnerable to the unremitting threat of sin.<sup>81</sup>

Both traditionalists and progressives, conservatives and liberals, thus adhered to the myth of the clean and good child—a simple, essentially virtuous being of limitless potential. This continued well into the 1980s, when a resurgence of puritanical thought accompanied the entrenchment of cultural conservatism. A romanticized conception of childhood was fundamental to the increasingly dominant ideology of the time, particularly to that of Ronald Reagan. With his “Morning in America” rhetoric, for

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., ix.

<sup>81</sup> In *Guardians Of Tradition: American Schoolbooks Of The Nineteenth Century* (1964), Ruth Miller Elson shows this to be a primary ideological trend, one which has underlain two centuries of American pedagogy. A psychological reduction of the child—not unlike the physical reductions of the stuffed animals in Kelley's assemblages—has long been cultivated in the United States. Thus, she explains, “the world created in nineteenth-century schoolbooks is essentially a world of fantasy—a fantasy made up by adults as a guide for their children, but inhabited by no one outside the pages of schoolbooks.” Children were thus understood as empty receptacles to be filled with absolute and unambiguous truths. While American textbooks have since progressed beyond these early prototypes, Elson's analysis reveals that this core ideal was still dominant in the 1960s (Ruth Miller Elson, *Guardians of Tradition* (1964), reprinted in *The Cult of Youth in Middle-Class America*, 14-15).

example, Reagan put forth a vision of the country reborn as an virtuous child<sup>82</sup>—a symbol for the wholesome values and genuine morality believed to have been abandoned two decades prior. In fact, the family unit constituted the primary symbol in Reagan’s mythology. As James Combs explains in *The Reagan Range*, Reagan advanced a “politics of nostalgia” that “use[d] the Family as a metaphor for domestic power, one that instructs us in a social hierarchy headed by older adult males in positions of social power,...obeyed by those deemed children in whatever sense.”<sup>83</sup> This construction boiled down to the restoration of adult patriarchal authority over innocent children in need of fatherly guidance.

The archetype of the immaculate child thus endured—though with consequences very different from those produced during less reactionary times. Young people were viewed not as sources of visionary energy or radical political thought, but as the beneficiaries of established principles. After decades of apparent laxity, children were seen as badly in need of protection from ubiquitous forces of deviancy. Understood as a vulnerability rather than a strength, youthful naïveté was cited as justification for retrenchment—for a return to decency.

Among the manifestations of this thinking was the Attorney General’s 1986 “Final Report” on pornography. As discussed in chapter two, this document characterized smut as a physically and psychologically damaging influence on otherwise

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<sup>82</sup> Todd Gitlin, *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America is Wracked by Culture Wars* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1995), 78.

<sup>83</sup> Combs, 47.

innocent children—basically a form of child-abuse.<sup>84</sup> Similarly, the PMRC’s Senate hearings (1985), discussed in chapter one, characterized popular music as a danger to the fragile, unsullied souls of America’s children.<sup>85</sup> (In 1986, televangelist Jimmy Swaggart married these two governmental censures into a unified condemnation of rock-and-roll as “the new pornography.”<sup>86</sup>) Such partisan spectacles were implicitly and explicitly directed against the liberalism of the sixties and its perceived legacy. However, the idealization of childhood that underlay these attacks was actually quite similar to that of the counterculture they supposedly targeted.

Created in the late eighties and early nineties, Kelley’s stuffed animal works operate in direct opposition to such fictions. These not only include the *Arena* series, but a host of additional toy-assemblages from this period.<sup>87</sup> *Plush Kundalini and Chakra Set* (1987) (fig. 118), for example, is one of his earliest thrift-store-doll works, consisting of a twenty-two-foot-long white snake surging up from floor to ceiling. Five monochrome mounds of stuffed animals—yellow, white, red, green, gray—ornament this cuddly leviathan at evenly spaced increments along its body. As the title suggests, the work refers to the ancient Hindu practice of Tantra, in which participants attempt to raise their psychosexual energy, or “kundalini,” up the spine (symbolized as a snake) along a series

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<sup>84</sup> Kendrick, 235.

<sup>85</sup> Weinstein, 249-63.

<sup>86</sup> Jonathan M. Roldan, “Radio-Active Fallout And An Uneasy Truce: The Aftermath Of The Porn Rock Wars,” *Loyola Entertainment Law Journal* 7 (1987), 256.

<sup>87</sup> In addition to the works discussed here, Kelley’s *Manly Craft* (1989) sculptures are relevant here. As mentioned in chapter one, they feature handcrafted yarn octopi bound into erect penises with adorably smiling testicles.

of focal points, called “chakras.” Once the ascent is complete, the individual supposedly experiences the union of the god Shiva and his goddess Parvati.<sup>88</sup> In Kelley’s construction, this pinnacle is preposterously represented by a large, multicolored orb of dolls—a mixture of the color-coordinated bundles designating previous chakra levels—placed atop the enormous serpent. As Kelley explains,

In *Plush Kundalini and Chakra Set* (1987), the toys are taken out of the child’s world and returned to the adult domain from which they originated. This is achieved by ordering them in an adult system, specifically the Tantric image of the kundalini snake. With its overtones of sexuality and power, the image of the kundalini reinvests in the dolls what has been left out.<sup>89</sup>

In relation to his subsequent stuffed-animal conglomerations, such overtones are actually rather subtle. *E.T.’s Long Neck, Two Brains, Penis, and Scrotum* (1989), for example, is a lewd, ten-foot-tall personage, with an E.T. head, a stuffed-banana torso, and genitals made from a grinning frog flanked by two fuzzy footballs. Also featured in the aforementioned *Arena 5*, E.T. is a recurring character in Kelley’s perverted plays. Like the cutesy dolls that inhabit his other assemblages, the loveable movie alien is sexless, playful and immanently innocent—a supreme model of idealized childhood. In fact, the film itself is founded on a strict opposition between cynical adults and indefatigably hopeful children. As Kelley explains,

[*E.T.* director] Steven Spielberg is somebody who has a real investment in pandering to this culture’s fixation with the fantasy of the innocence of childhood. He always presents this idea in positive terms. The aliens in both “Close Encounters of the Third Kind” and “E.T.” look like children... “E.T.” is a parable

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<sup>88</sup> For an overview and examination of Tantra, see *The Roots of Tantra*, ed. Katherine Anne Harper and Robert L. Brown (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002).

<sup>89</sup> Kelley, “Three Projects,” *Minor Histories*, 14-15.

of the innocence of childhood. “E.T.” represents the child as outsider, as an innocent being out of place in the cruel world of adulthood.”<sup>90</sup>

Interestingly, though, this character actually looks remarkably genital, with its scrotum-like head, bulging eyeballs and priapic neck that goes erect whenever he gets excited.<sup>91</sup> This last trait is portrayed in Kelley’s *Homesick (Personified Lump and Its Pure State)* (1991) (fig. 119), an installation of black and white drawings, including a large one of E.T. Here, the alien is shown with an excessively long neck (over 90 inches), extending out from the wall, onto the floor and into the center of the gallery—thus exaggerating its phallic qualities. The intention of such works is to blatantly pollute popular idealizations of childhood by transforming them into exactly what they are designed to disguise. In some of Kelley’s final dirty-doll constructions, this transformation is achieved with even greater directness. As part of his 1991 “Lumpenprole” installation (fig. 120), for example, two stuffed bears hang from the ceiling—one upside-down, with a vaginal strip rubbed into the fur between its legs, and the other with penile forms attached to its crotch and chest. Here, Kelley has literally replaced what has been left out of these toys, drawing attention to that lack in “normal” dolls.

McCarthy achieves comparable effects in a series of sculptures, also from the early nineties, in which stuffed-animal-like figures are transformed from G- to X-rated. The two furry friends in *Bear and Rabbit* (1991) (fig. 121), for instance, are perched atop a Formica pedestal in an erotic, back-to-front embrace, as if the latter is being humped by

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<sup>90</sup> Kelley, “Black Nostalgia,” 54.

<sup>91</sup> Kelley has commented on this himself, remarking that “The alien in ‘E.T.’ is ugly, you could even say it looks sort of ‘genital,’ which is an amusing contradiction given Spielberg’s aesthetics!” (Ibid.).

the former. Their conventionally cutesy faces and cuddly bodies are recast as signs of orgasmic arousal. The rabbit's open mouth, raised brow and outstretched arms thus read as a paroxysm of pleasure and pain, while the bear's gaping grin and glassy-eyed expression suggest ejaculatory release. Similarly, the twin polecats in *Skunks* (1993) (fig. 122) stand on faux tree stumps, eyes bulging and mouths open, masturbating protracted penile appendages.

As with his *PROPO* photographs, the large scale of McCarthy's figures (they are each about six feet tall) renders them funny and monstrous at the same time. This effect is even more pronounced in the depraved sculptures, which effectively infantilize those who look up at them. These creatures also exhibit distinctly adult proportions, further disrupting the standard stuffed-animal format. Heads, limbs and torsos thus appear fully developed, rather than baby-like. Literally towering over viewers, these imposing critters are unexpectedly mature in body as well as behavior.

As such, McCarthy's *Bear and Rabbit* and *Skunks* refer not only to children's toys, but to another, uniquely American manifestation of idealized childhood: the loveable characters that welcome visitors to Disneyland and its various derivatives. Thus, McCarthy's well-endowed skunks stroke flesh-toned phalluses. Dangling from these furry beasts as if from beneath a costume, these penises are not only adult, but definitively human. Both works, meanwhile, emphasize their enormous scales and grown-up proportions—qualities standard to such characters, but subliminally disregarded within their appropriate contexts. McCarthy effectively suspends this suspension of disbelief, mounting his mammals on high pedestals, tweaking their expressions and gestures, and posing them in vulgar positions. They thus become blatant

perversions of an archetype, which, like the stuffed animals that Kelley arranges, is loaded with cultural significance. In fact, the forms to which McCarthy refers are designed to maintain an actual fantasyland of idealized adult-child relations. If the stuffed animal is a surrogate baby, the theme park character arguably serves as a surrogate parent—neutered, and thus similarly cleansed of discomfoting qualities. (Indeed, whether in parks or in television shows and movies, these characters often serve as guides, providing moral and educational lessons to their young cohorts.) Reinvested with sexuality, McCarthy's sculptures reveal what lies beneath, both physically and psychologically. His perverse tableaux suggest what these performers might do at the end of the day when the children have all gone home.

In essence, these works are explicitly adult and childlike, human and animal, at the same time—a conflation of categories whose autonomy is crucial to accepted standards of propriety and normality. As with Kelley's stuffed animals, the disturbing effects of McCarthy's figures are enhanced by their particular surface qualities. However, whereas Kelley's are crude, dirty and definitively handmade, McCarthy's are expertly crafted and pristine, with a remarkably high degree of finish. Although they similarly refer to childhood forms, McCarthy's beasts are therefore not simply seen as reconfigured playthings, but as freshly produced hybrids, painstakingly manufactured to exact—though degenerate—specifications. They evoke not the hand of an adolescent prankster, as Kelley's relatively haphazard assemblages do, but that of some perverted, yet skilled, artisan. Lacking the filth and grime of Kelley's toys, their impiety is purely a function of their hybrid status. As with much of McCarthy's oeuvre, these works exemplify Mary Douglas's contention that "dirtiness" is really just a disruption of

society's organizing schemes.<sup>92</sup> The dirtier something seems, the more sacred the violated principles.

With similar disregard for such standards, Pettibon offers an even crasser variation of the amusement park buddy in his 1986 zine, *Bottomless Pond* (fig. 123). Here, a grinning Mickey Mouse—the most famous of them all—has dropped his pants, displaying distinctly adult genitals. “ALL MY GROUPIES ARE 9, 10 YEARS OLD AT THE MOST,” he explains. Like Kelley and McCarthy's re-sexualized forms, Pettibon's drawing returns to the childhood icon his missing member—blatantly disrupting the antiseptic Disneyland illusion. Yet, as with the human penises in McCarthy's *Skunks*, the addition of this anatomical detail may be deprived, but it is not at all unrealistic. The work literally exposes the Mickey Mouse impersonator for what he is: an adult performing what is essentially an adult fantasy about childhood purity.

Coupled with its suggestion of nine- and ten-year-old groupies—who, by definition, willingly seek out sexual encounters with their idols—the work is almost unbearable. Yet, again, this revulsion attests to the absolute sanctity of the ideals Pettibon perverts, along with the enduring denial of that which those ideals conceal. The work betrays exactly what society's most ubiquitous symbols of childhood are designed to suppress—namely, the profound psychosexual relationship between children and adults.<sup>93</sup> Pettibon shamelessly desublimates this relationship, turning a model of youthful purity and idealized parent-child relations into one of pedophilia and, even more

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<sup>92</sup> Douglas, 35.

<sup>93</sup> As Freud reminds us, “a child's intercourse with anyone responsible for his care affords him an unending source of sexual excitation and satisfaction” (Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, 89).

shockingly, its requital. As such, this reconfiguration is actually closer to what Freud describes—albeit inflated to an extremely inappropriate degree. Indeed, as a surrogate adult, Mickey Mouse loves children, and they him. Pettibon simply carries this mutual affection well beyond the point of aberration.

Kelley matches this obscenity in two 1990 photographs that directly relate to his sculptural works from this period. Rather than just arranging already soiled toys, however, he himself orchestrates the defilement of these icons of innocence, staging odious acts and documenting them photographically. Both *Manipulating Mass-Produced Idealized Objects* (fig. 124) and *Nostalgic Depiction of the Innocence of Childhood* (fig. 125) are images from the same performance, in which artists Bob Flanagan and Sheree Rose engage in naked, stuffed-animal bestiality. Rose is shown “sixty-nining” a giant pillowy rabbit, while Flanagan wipes his shit-smearred genitals and buttocks against smaller furry friends.<sup>94</sup> As with all of Kelley’s toy works, the instinct to personify the dolls inevitably causes these acts to be read as some sort of twisted pedophilic abuse. Yet, the performers actually exhibit an outlandish—but not all that uncommon—type of fetishism called “plushophilia,” in which adults use stuffed dolls as objects of sexual pleasure.<sup>95</sup> The phenomenon ranges from masturbation with these toys to sex while

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<sup>94</sup> Rose and Flanagan have also addressed similar themes of childhood sexuality in their own work. In *Visiting Hours* (1992), for example, the pair transformed the Santa Monica Museum of Art into a pediatric hospital ward, with Flanagan himself as patient (he was actually suffering at the time from cystic fibrosis, which killed him in 1996). One of the main subjects of this installation/performance was the relationship between masochism and infancy. As Linda S. Kauffman puts it in *Bad Girls and Sick Boys: Fantasies in Contemporary Art and Culture* (1998), “Childhood, the exhibition implies, is tinged with sexual curiosity” (Kauffman, 25).

<sup>95</sup> For an introduction to plushophilia, see “Cuddle Time,” by Dave Hill, salon.com, 2003 (<http://dir.salon.com/sex/feature/2000/06/19/plushies/index.html?pn=1>). Kelley

dressed in jolly animal costumes. It thus relates not only to these images, but also to McCarthy's adult-sized animal statues and own toy defilements, as well as Pettibon's molesting Mickey Mouse.

Plushophilia obviously involves an blatant regression to childhood. Not only do infants regularly caress and rub against their soft objects, but such epidermal stimulation is fundamentally sexual in nature, satisfying their earliest masturbatory desires.<sup>96</sup> What is benign and routine in children, however, is considered utterly depraved when replicated by adults—a double standard repeatedly exploited by Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon. In *Manipulating Mass-Produced Idealized Objects and Nostalgic Depiction of the Innocence of Childhood*, this contradiction is set in high relief, as the romping adults are effectively infantilized on one hand, while the stuffed surrogate children are adult-ized on the other. Meanwhile, the caption-like titles of these works insinuate that the elicited issues are those of adults, not children. The first clarifies that the toys are the products of commercialism and cultural ideals, rather than innate infantile inclinations. The second sardonically reminds us that the dirty behavior depicted in the image derives from supposedly innocent children. The latter photo's sepia tone—itsself a kitschy device used to give new images an old-fashioned appearance—enhances this effect, imparting a spuriously contrived nostalgia not unlike that of the sanitized stuffed animal form. Both photographs undermine this artifice by explicitly re-sexualizing that de-sexualized form. And again the viewer is stuck in a paradoxical position caused by his or her own

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acknowledges the connection between his work and plushophilia in a 1999 interview (Kelley, "Black Nostalgia," 53).

<sup>96</sup> Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, 67.

assumptions and responses. One's instinct to condemn the depicted behavior clashes with the fact—made explicit by Kelley's captions—that Rose and Flanagan are only reproducing the common activities of supposedly innocent infants.

McCarthy's plushophilia involves much more than his giant skunks, bear and rabbit. In works dating back to the late-seventies and early-eighties, he has regularly employed stuffed toys, dolls and animal costumes in order to critique myths of childhood innocence. Performances such as *Class Fool* (1976), *Grand Pop* (1977) (fig. 126), *Doctor* (1978), *Contemporary Cure All* (1979) and *Monkey Man* (1980) prominently featured plastic playthings, systematically sullied with various body-fluid-like condiments. (Some of these dolls later showed up in the *PROPO* photos.) With *Mother Pig* (1983) and *Popeye, Judge and Jury* (1983), McCarthy first turned his attention to stuffed animals. In the former, he faux-urinated on a cuddly, bright-orange lion, squirting it with a ketchup container held at his crotch. In the latter, he fondled a floppy hare, rubbing various food-products into its increasingly grubby fur.

Such abuses are also central to his more recent work. In the video *Cultural Soup* (1987), McCarthy methodically molests two tiny dolls, introduced as “nice little boys and girls,” engulfing them in his brawny fists and stroking them with mayonnaise. Unavoidably, the scene is read as child abuse. By the mid-nineties, he had begun employing plush character costumes—similar to those appearing contemporaneously in his sculptures—in a series of madcap adaptations of classic childhood stories. In *Pinocchio Pipenose Housedilemma* (1994), for example, he offers a demented performance dressed as Carlo Collodi's famous puppet-boy. However, McCarthy's glossy, patently cartoonish costume refers less to the original Pinocchio narrative than to

the Disney animation film that established it as one of the most celebrated coming-of-age parables. Embodying this idealized—and, of course, sexless—prototype of childhood innocence, McCarthy literally degrades him. The debauchery begins with Pinocchio cutting a hole in the crotch of his pants and inserting a large white stuffed snake, thus replacing his missing member. Meanwhile, the character’s notoriously extensible nose is represented by a rigid metal pipe that exaggerates its already-phallic quality.<sup>97</sup> McCarthy reinforces this association by periodically using his stiffened olfactory organ as a penis. In addition to poking it through various holes in the walls, he rhythmically thrusts it into a jar of mayonnaise, spewing forth the semen-like substance with each push.<sup>98</sup>

As Giacinto Di Pietrantonio explains in “Pinocchio Pipenose Household dilemma” (1996), “where Disney reorganizes and scrubs clean to create a kind of ethos of internationalized Goodness, [McCarthy]...inverts this ethos, revealing instead the puppet-boy’s basest and most commonplace instincts.”<sup>99</sup> Indeed, Pinocchio is presented as both distinctly childlike—with his infantile proportions, clumsy movements and food-playing antics—and overtly sexual. So are the characters in *Santa Chocolate Shop* (1996-97), another McCarthy reconfiguration of a popular childhood fairytale. The work depicts an increasingly disturbing Christmas orgy, in which actors dressed in elf costumes and furry reindeer suits hump and “defecate” chocolate syrup on each other. (Reminiscent of Pettibon’s exposed Mickey Mouse, one of these reindeer has a hole strategically cut in his costume, revealing his actual adult genitals.) In a twist particular to these two works,

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<sup>97</sup> Di Pietrantonio, 91.

<sup>98</sup> Groos, Schmidt and Schröder, 137.

<sup>99</sup> Di Pietrantonio, 90.

McCarthy has required viewers of both *Santa Chocolate Shop* and *Pinocchio Pipenose Housedilemma* to don the costumes worn in the videos,<sup>100</sup> forcing them to enact their own personal plushophilic performances.

It is the children, however, that are actually the first plushophiles—a situation encouraged by every parent who buys their kid a stuffed animal. They are also, as Kelley's photos and McCarthy's chocolate-sauce frenzies suggest, the first coprophiliacs. Both aberrations—the former evoked by works that sexualize children's toys, the latter by those which soil them—are only the most literal manifestations of the notion that all sexual abominations are, in fact, rooted in normal childhood. As evidenced by the work of Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon, reference to these perversions renders this not only explicit, but unavoidable. In light of qualities that are simultaneously—and inseparably—abhorrent and childlike, the conception of the inherently pure bundle of joy becomes thoroughly untenable.

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<sup>100</sup> Groos, Schmidt and Schröder, 155-56.

## CONCLUSION

### THE (DE)CIVILIZING PROCESS

In an early scene from Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy's collaborative video *Heidi* (1991), two dinky hand-puppets—a plastic frog and a plush bee—converse before a makeshift cardboard backdrop. “We represent nature in a pure, basic and essential way,” Mr. Bee boasts. Mr. Frog agrees: “When we commingle, we produce the wholeness of the universe, like the Egyptian god, the sky and earth, whose union is the world!” As the self-proclaimed antitheses of “the family on the mountain,” the two critters thus advance an opposition between animals and human beings—between nature and the “cheap theatrics, façade and lies” of culture. Despite their solemn tone and highfalutin language, however, the gravity of this philosophical rumination is negated by the inelegance of the puppets and the perversity of their puppeteer, who, at the end of the scene, is shown with his pants at his knees. A parody of romantic pantheism, the scene establishes the essential terms contested by Kelley and McCarthy throughout their video-caricature.

Founded upon those very terms, Johanna Spyri's original *Heidi* novel (1881) plainly rests upon an antagonism between nature and culture—the former linked to health and happiness, the latter to sickness and misery. It is Allan Dwan's 1937 Hollywood adaptation, however, that serves as Kelley and McCarthy's primary point of reference.

This film, and its numerous remakes, not only brought Spyri's fable to the United States, but embedded it in American popular culture. Heidi is as much an American icon as an Swiss one—if not more so. As Timothy Martin puts it in “Heidi: The Wages of Neutrality” (2000),

Like and old hand-me-down, it is now forgotten and rediscovered in the perennial generational cycle that consumes all children's stories once they have taken hold. Its imagery, however, has become more or less ubiquitous and, by the same token, somewhat generic in its meaning. *Heidi* has been transformed in the American popular consciousness into a chain of nostalgic signifiers. The image of a sunny Alpine landscape or Swiss chalet, the sound of a yodel or the “moo” of an alphorn are all that it takes to bring to mind an image of Heidi, up on the mountain with the goats, waving, calling, “Oh Grandfather! Oh Peter! Oh Klara!”<sup>1</sup>

Kelley and McCarthy's version is a freewheeling pageant of profanity, in which the two artists alternate playing the roles of Heidi and Grandfather alongside stuffed dummies of Peter the boy goatherd and Klara the sickly city girl. In no way faithful to the narrative, their bizarre and disturbing interactions transform the enchanting morality tale into a lewd, multi-layered grotesque, steeped in child abuse, sadomasochism and scatology. Yet, as with much of these artists' work, *Heidi* does not simply invert the values connoted by the original story. Rather than merely substituting corruption for innocence, perversion for purity, the video mixes and fuses such opposites, multiplying their meanings and thus precluding any kind of definitive valuation.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, Kelley and McCarthy repeatedly refer to a contrary, but similarly pervasive, notion of the rural home as a place where feeble-minded hicks engage in bestiality, incest

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Martin, “Heidi: The Wages of Neutrality,” in *Collaborative Works*, 22.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

and other abominations.<sup>3</sup> The video's violent overtones and cheap horror-movie histrionics—maniacal laughter, monstrous groans, distorted sounds and campy slow-motion effects—reinforce this connotation. The style of the work is itself a synthesis of two incompatible aesthetics: part sterile Hollywood folk-tale, part *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*.<sup>4</sup> As McCarthy himself recounts, “in American horror films, your car runs out of gas in the middle of the woods and you go to the family house where this crazy inbred family cuts you up.”<sup>5</sup> Despite its romantic source, Kelley and McCarthy's *Heidi* depicts the countryside as barbaric and perilous, rather than wholesome and rejuvenating.

This nature-phobia is further emphasized by the video's numerous allusions to Adolf Loos's ultra-modernist manifesto, “Ornament and Crime” (1908), quoted at length during a scene of Heidi having her buttocks tattooed.<sup>6</sup> An apology for austere, undecorated architecture, the treatise characterizes ornamentation—both edificial and bodily—as the definitive sign of savagery and degeneracy.<sup>7</sup> Arguing that humanity's “primitive” instincts must be vigorously suppressed in the name of civilization, Loos essentially reversed romanticism's veneration of uncorrupted nature. Though he certainly would have deemed a movie like *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* culturally

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<sup>3</sup> Monk, 14.

<sup>4</sup> *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) is a film by Tobe Hooper. It is widely considered a highpoint of the American horror-movie genre (see *Splatter Movies: Breaking the Last Taboo of the Screen*, by John McCarty [New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984], 88-101).

<sup>5</sup> McCarthy, interview with Marc Selwyn (Phaidon), 130.

<sup>6</sup> Loos's text is central to the fourth part of the video, subtitled “Ornament and Education,” in which this tattooing scene takes place.

<sup>7</sup> Adolf Loos, “Ornament and Crime,” in *Ornament and Crime: Selected Essays*, ed. Adolf Opel, trans. Michael Mitchell (Riverside, California: Ariadne Press, 1997).

malignant, Loos's fear of the natural is similar to that which underlies the horror film, in which country bumpkins are cast as homicidal cannibals.

Kelley and McCarthy's *Heidi* parody is therefore, like much of their work, double-edged. It destabilizes the initial idealization and its subsequent inversion—nature-as-moral and nature-as-amoral—by tangling them up so that they cancel each other out. (The video's stage-set is a similarly knotty amalgamation. Half kitschy Alpine chalet, half mock-up of Loos's modernist American Bar, it echoes the grotesque clashes effected by the work overall.<sup>8</sup>) This hybridization renders both positions equally reductive and equally utopian. Thus, Peter is both an innocent child and an imbecile, Grandfather a parental guardian and a deranged hillbilly. They are paragons of country life, at once sick and healthy, criminal and just, psychotic and idyllic. An interweaving of mutually exclusive ideals, the video is a dialectic meditation on the nature-culture dichotomy at the core of these oppositions.

The work's *pièce de résistance* is an hilariously ribald scene of Heidi and Grandfather forcibly toilet-training the young Peter (fig. 127). Standing beside the child's bare buttocks (actually a rubber prosthesis), they force him to pass a series of fecal foods—chocolate milk, sausage, salami—through his anus, into a pot. Here, Kelley and McCarthy broaden the scope of the video's key dialectic, universalizing it and identifying its root: acculturation through bodily self-control. Indeed, the proper retention and disposal of one's waste is what drives the initial wedge between nature and culture—the first major step in the subordination of the former to the latter. As presented in *Heidi*, this exercise is unequivocally abusive. When the increasingly larger meats get

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<sup>8</sup> Designed by Loos in 1908, the American Bar is in Vienna, Austria.

stuck in Peter's bowels, for example, Heidi and Grandfather dispassionately slice open his supple anal skin and shove them through. Such sadistic violence symbolizes the actual psychological trauma of toilet-training—accomplished through parental manipulation and monitoring of the child's most basic and intimate natural functions. With wicked humor, Kelley and McCarthy characterize society's primary initiation process as painful and perverse.

In this sense, *Heidi* is not only a collaborative work, but a culminating one as well. It incorporates a range of issues raised throughout both artists' oeuvres. As explained in previous chapters, constructed definitions of "nature" and "culture" are addressed by a host of McCarthy performances from the 1970s and 80s, while the cycle of coercive socialization informs videos like *Family Tyranny* and the animatronic sculptures *The Garden* and *Cultural Gothic*. Likewise, much of Kelley's work—his adolescent-inspired graffiti, his felt banners, his stuffed-animal sculptures—engage these same issues and categories.

A large portion of Pettibon's oeuvre also deals with such themes, though usually without Kelley and McCarthy's notoriously scatological humor. His counterculture works implicitly critique the romantic exaltation of nature, especially the faith in the liberation of natural desire as an antidote to a repressive and corrupt culture. Pettibon exposes the horrific potential of this formula. His drawings represent a deeply pessimistic conception of human nature and, as with the *Heidi* video and the aforementioned Kelley and McCarthy works, an acute discomfort with the generational—and largely imperceptible—cycle of acculturation. As the father explains to his son in the

*Bottomless Pond* image mentioned in chapter two, “it may not seem like fun for you now, but when you’re a big boy you’ll be doing the same things I do.”

Indeed, all three artists can be said to offer anthropological examinations of society’s “civilizing process,” a term established by Norbert Elias in his 1939 book of that name. Tracing the evolution of decorum in Western culture, Elias characterizes the advent of modernity as a “change in the economy of drives and emotions.”<sup>9</sup> As the rigidity of medieval society began to give way, rules of civility were established to organize an increasingly more complex and fluid social structure.<sup>10</sup> Manners thus became prescribed, spaces circumscribed, behaviors categorized. Initially imposed through treatises and educational pamphlets regulating basic bodily functions—eating, drinking and nose-blowing, fornication, defecation and urination—such restrictions were gradually internalized and naturalized. A system of “habitual, technically and institutionally consolidated self-control,” enforced through shame and guilt, was engrained into the individual’s psyche.<sup>11</sup> By the nineteenth century, this system had become virtually instinctive, its artificiality rendered invisible by centuries of indoctrination and compulsive routine. For Elias, what differentiates modern society is not only the primacy of self-restraint, but the fact that it seems innate. Indeed, it is this latter attribute that makes the system so effective.

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<sup>9</sup> Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations* (Revised Edition), ed. Eric Dunning, Johan Goudsblom and Stephen Mennell, trans. Edmund Jephcott with some notes and corrections by the author (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), 107.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 55-63.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

The implications of Elias's study were and continue to be profound. By historicizing the development of everyday manners, revulsions and aversions, *The Civilizing Process* effectively de-naturalizes them. Arguing that the psychogenesis of adults can only be understood in relation to the "sociogenesis" of modern civilization, Elias links reflexive inhibitions to broad shifts in political power and social hierarchy.<sup>12</sup> This understanding is rooted in Freud's notion of the superego as at once product and cornerstone of civil society.<sup>13</sup> Elias's detailed history provides the empirical sociological support for Freud's psychological theory. For both, civilization is founded upon a system of mutual self-restraint, in the name of mutual self-protection from the potentially dangerous drives of others.<sup>14</sup> The human psyche is in a perpetual state of conflict between inherent desire and its obligatory renunciation—between nature and culture.

The essential innovation offered by these texts is the recognition that social norms—and the deep-seated compulsion to conform to them—are culturally constructed, not congenital. This revelation inspired generations of psychosocial theorists. As discussed in chapter two, the basic nature-culture opposition underlain the work of Wilhelm Reich and Norman O. Brown, as well as the early writings of Herbert Marcuse. Yet, whereas these thinkers cast doubt on the fixity of social mores, they do not dispute the naturalness of the instincts which those mores are designed to restrict. For them, as

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

<sup>13</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, trans. & ed. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961), 72-75.

<sup>14</sup> Elias, 369.

for Freud and Elias, such instincts represent the “nature” against which “culture” is—for better or worse—strategically positioned.

The idea that seemingly innate drives are themselves socially determined emerged in the mid-1970s, as indicated by the sociological work of John H. Gagnon and William Simon and the broad historical analyses of Michel Foucault. Desire was thus shown to be the product of preordained social scripts, classifications and apparently liberating discourses. This not only invalidated the basis of the “sexual revolution,” but, more fundamentally, collapsed the nature-culture polarity upon which it was founded. By redefining sexuality, these authors necessarily confronted the much larger issue of human nature itself. As Gagnon and Simon explained, their subject was the surest path toward this confrontation, for “at no point is the belief in the natural and universal human more entrenched than in the study of sexuality.”<sup>15</sup>

The issue also became central to contemporary critiques of gender, as explored in chapter three. Beginning with the reassessment of feminist strategies in the late 1970s, these critiques culminated in the eighties and nineties, when both femininity and masculinity were called into question. Theorists such as Judith Butler shifted the debate away from feminism’s version of the nature-culture opposition, toward the construction of gender itself, subverting essentialisms across the political spectrum. As with Gagnon and Simon and Foucault, at stake was the presumption of a universal human core. All of these thinkers effectively de-naturalized human nature just as Freud and Elias had de-naturalized human culture. The “civilizing process,” their work implies, involves the social production not only of norms and standards, but of instincts and identity as well.

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<sup>15</sup> Gagnon and Simon, 3-4.

It is against this backdrop that the much of Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon's work can best be understood. Their performances, videos, drawings, paintings and sculptures operate in relation to similar issues, evoking similar conclusions. Like the aforementioned theoretic shift, their work represents a distinctly post-sixties outlook, one which crystallized during their early, largely music-oriented careers. Again, this was primarily a response to the reductive thinking of the counterculture, with its Rousseauian conception of a human nature repressed by culture and thus in desperate need of liberation. Counterculture music was an obvious target, for it was not only the most prominent manifestation of this vision, but was also the contemporary era's most grandiose and populist attempt at political art. Whether musical or visual, the work of Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon embodies a newly embittered approach, rising from the ashes of incinerated idealisms. Despite its vulgarity, perversity and crudity, this approach is in fact markedly cerebral—a sobering-up from what Robert Storr refers to as “the 1970s contact-hangover which had all too quickly substituted itself for a 1960s contact-high.”<sup>16</sup>

The dogged anti-dogmatism of their work has thus enabled them to avoid the pitfalls and limitations of much contemporary American politics. As historian and former SDS leader Todd Gitlin describes in *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America Is Wracked by Cultural Wars* (1995), the post-sixties period has been, and continues to be, characterized by a vast fragmentation of the “New Left.” In reaction to the failed utopianism of the counterculture period, dissenters abandoned collective issues for insular and narrowly focused personal causes. “What we have,” Gitlin explains, “is

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<sup>16</sup> Storr, ““You Are What You Read,”” 42.

an ill-fitting sum of groups overly concerned with protecting and purifying what they imagine to be their identities...each with its activists, its lineage, its injuries, its martyrs, and its claim to justice.” Reliant upon clear distinctions between insiders and outsiders, this “new identity orthodoxy” has engendered a surfeit of essentialist thought, informing not only feminist positions, but also the politics of race, ethnicity, geography, and sexuality. “The result,” Gitlin concludes, “is petty—and sometimes more than petty—aggression and deafness, an obsession with purifications.”<sup>17</sup> On the Right, meanwhile, a fierce consolidation of ideals conversely emerged. The ascendance of Ronald Reagan secured a different but similarly stifling type of reductivism, founded upon absolute, Manichean oppositions—right versus wrong, good versus evil, us versus them.<sup>18</sup>

As mentioned throughout this dissertation, Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon undermine the doctrinairism of both the Right and Left. However, their rejection of certainty is not simply nihilistic. Their work offers neither wholesale negation nor blind affirmation. Rather, it represents a kind of anti-utopian *optimism*, achieved through the active disruption and conflation of idealistic principles, terms and categories—to these artists, the true enemies of enlightenment. Their approach is similar to that theorized by Peter Sloterdijk in *Critique of Cynical Reason* (1983). As an alternative to the counterproductive platitudes of identity politics, Sloterdijk advocates a “great philosophical buffoonery,” an impudent cheekiness that seeks out inconsistencies within

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<sup>17</sup> Gitlin, 33-35.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

lofty ideological convictions.<sup>19</sup> This “art of pissing against the idealist wind,” Sloterdijk contends, serves as “a kind of argumentation...[that] respectable thinking does not know how to deal with.”<sup>20</sup> The result is a new type of cultural and political discourse—anti-conservative and anti-liberal—which abandons grandiose objectives and the hope for permanent resolution.<sup>21</sup> Embracing this unchangeable uncertainty, Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon spotlight the contradictions and complexities of contemporary society, frustrating the “obsession with purifications” identified by Gitlin. (In this sense, their persistent focus on the hybrid—whether physical, conceptual, or stylistic—is itself an implicit rejection of such purity.) Thus, they foster a certain pluralism in opposition to a fragmentary and impotent multiculturalism; their breakdown of borders and distinctions may be inconvenient, but it allows for more practical and nuanced perspectives. The muddled view emerges as the clearer one.

The strategy of entrapment employed by these artists is designed to elicit this chaotic clarity. Anticipating preconditioned responses, their work renders the invisible visible, forcing viewers into confrontation with their own beliefs and ideological frameworks. As a result, it short-circuits the polemical posturing and myopic focus that render various positions specious and impractical. Thus, whereas they repeatedly tackle

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<sup>19</sup> Sloterdijk, 87. Like Gitlin, Sloterdijk argues that “identity is the magic word of a partially hidden, partially open conservatism that has inscribed personal identity, occupational identity, natural identity, political identity, female identity, male identity, class identity, party identity, etc., on its banner” (Sloterdijk, 60-61).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 101, 105. The “great philosophical buffoonery” articulated by Sloterdijk is also arguably present in the contemporaneous work of certain German artists—Martin Kippenberger, Albert Oehlen, Georg Herold and Rosemary Trockel among them.

<sup>21</sup> Andreas Huyssen, “Forward: The Return of Diogenes as Postmodern Intellectual,” in *Critique of Cynical Reason*, x.

issues of identity, their work can hardly be characterized as identity politics in any conventional sense of the term. Indeed, it is impossible to pinpoint where exactly these artists stand in relation to the issues they raise; their critiques are acerbic, but impartial—sometimes gallingly so. They choose calculated instigation rather than reformation, troublemaking instead of problem-solving. The real culprits are therefore not the creators of seemingly depraved works of art, but acculturated viewers and the social rules by which they abide. Admonitions boomerang.

The use of this strategy of entrapment to attack socially determined conceptions of nature, culture and their relationship to each other is the essential commonality between Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon. It is also the reason that childhood figures so prominently in the work of all three. Yet, these artists do not just intend to undermine popular ideas of infancy. Viewing American childhood as a cipher for American values at large, they seek to complicate the overly simplistic terms upon which those values are based.<sup>22</sup> In this sense, they concentrate on the early stages of life because it is then that such terms are initially absorbed into ordinary consciousness. Their work shifts attention from identity concerns to the ontological and much more profound “issue of conditioning and how it defines reality,” to use McCarthy words.<sup>23</sup> Rather than presenting childhood as the embodiment of human nature in order to justify a particular cultural politics, they evoke it as a way of questioning the inevitability of the civilizing process, of shaking its very foundations.

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<sup>22</sup> This idea of childhood as a cipher for society is suggested by Richard L. Rapson, in the introduction to *The Cult of Youth in Middle-Class America* (Rapson, viii).

<sup>23</sup> McCarthy, interview with Fereshteh Daftari (Phaidon), 141.

Of course, this is also why the topic is so crucial to Freud and Elias, as well as to more contemporary thinkers such as Foucault, Gagnon and Simon and Butler. It is during childhood that nature and culture are differentiated and self-restraint is instilled, determining whether the individual is to be deemed well-adjusted or mal-adjusted, normal or abnormal. The invisible system of social conditioning is culture's most essential agent of control, supremely powerful because it is concealed by the commonest of habits, gestures and daily rituals. It not only fixes gender, sexual and other behavioral norms, but naturalizes them; they seem to be the result of free will.<sup>24</sup> As Erik Erikson put it in *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (1968), "as the school child makes methods his own, he also permits accepted methods to make him their own."<sup>25</sup> Inscribed into virtually everything we do—indeed, into the conception of human nature itself—this inculcation is the basis of self and society.

Exposing the internal contradictions and hypocrisies of this process, Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon treat civility, morality and normalcy as relative and largely symbolic categories—that is, as key ideological buttresses for modern culture's most essential power relations. And by targeting childhood, they implicate the family as the dominant institution responsible for reifying those relations.<sup>26</sup> In "Deviations On A

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<sup>24</sup> As Elias explains, the conditioning of children "aims at making socially desirable behavior automatic, a matter of self-control, causing it to appear in the consciousness of individuals as the result of their own free will, and in the interests of their own health or human dignity" (Elias, 127).

<sup>25</sup> Erikson, 234.

<sup>26</sup> With the rise of modern society, Elias explains, "the family became the only—or, more exactly, the primary and dominant—institution with the function of instilling drive control" (Elias, 117).

Theme: Works By Paul McCarthy” (1994), Ralph Rugoff identifies this as the central objective of the artist’s work:

While McCarthy wreaks havoc with childhood’s idealized images, he’s less concerned with transgressing taboos than with examining the perverse nature of authoritarian hierarchies. Instead of being about “killing the father,” as in the avant-garde wish to shock authority, his work obsessively returns to the scene of paternal violence. The trauma of cultural conditioning in the consumerist family is McCarthy’s great motif.<sup>27</sup>

Though certainly most explicit in McCarthy’s work, this motif also runs through the oeuvres of Kelley and Pettibon. To be a “Pants Shitter and Proud” is not only to abandon the self-regulation of bodily functions and impulses, but to openly disavow acculturation itself. Refusing to be properly socialized, Kelley’s abject antiheroes are social outcasts. Yet, as suggested by Sloterdijk’s *Critique*, these losers are subversive in a way that more typical youth rebellions are not. Akin to McCarthy’s food-flinging man-children, Kelley’s laughingstocks are the products of failed conditioning, presumably at the hands of dysfunctional family units. Similarly, Pettibon’s suicidal, murderous and hyper-sexual teens satirize America’s child-centrism, which preaches the complete liberation of youthful desire on the one hand, the zealous protection of youthful innocence on the other. They too are progenies of botched upbringings informed by misguided ideals. Whether infantile, psychopathic or both, the buffoons that inhabit the work of Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon force the viewer into conscious confrontation with the rules of decorum that comprise Western civilization’s social contract.

Childhood is thus both the starting point and the end point of many of the other subjects these artists address, for it deals most directly with the elemental relationship of

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<sup>27</sup> Ralph Rugoff, “Deviations On A Theme: Works By Paul McCarthy,” *Artforum*, Oct 1994.

human nature to human culture. This is also why adolescence is particularly prominent in their oeuvres, since it is then that the two sides are in greatest conflict. An inherently contradictory being, the adolescent is the penultimate battleground between desire and restraint—between nature and culture. He is a readymade case-study in the trauma of conditioning. And, despite their rebellious façades, youth-based subcultures are part of this normalization process. Indeed, they often serve as transitions to adulthood, supplying temporary ideals, leaders and guidelines that assuage teenage identity crises, while serving as models for proper social functioning.<sup>28</sup> Thus, as Erikson explains, the “joiner” is much less of a threat than the “isolated youngster.”<sup>29</sup> The hippie, punk or metal-head is more likely to become a genteel member of society than the proverbial pants shitter. Through both their aural and visual work, Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon thus present popular music—the most prominent generator of adolescent subculture—as not only a safe sublimation of psychological tension, but a primary agent of social conformity.

Implicit here is the notion that the forces of conditioning are ubiquitous and inescapable, pervading both center and so-called margin, both mainstream and subculture. This resignation may seem defeatist, but as Sloterdijk contends, it is actually the only constructive outlook to be had, for it disqualifies the continued advancement of idealistic enterprises, deeply cynical because their proponent should (and often do) know

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<sup>28</sup> “Adolescents,” Erikson explains, “not only help one another temporarily through such discomfort by forming cliques and stereotyping themselves, their ideals, and their enemies; they also insistently test each other’s capacity for sustaining loyalties in the midst of inevitable conflicts and values” (Erikson, 132-33).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 253.

them to be unfeasible. In opposition to this “enlightened false consciousness”—the truly defeatist outlook—the work of Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon concede the long-proven impossibility of transcendence and resolution. Resistance for these artists lies neither in escaping the center, nor in harassing it from the margin. Rather, it consists of attacking from an acknowledged position within, and thus unraveling the basic ideals, values and standards according to which social conditioning is performed. Theirs is a de-civilizing process.

As discussed at the onset of this dissertation, Kelley’s 1988 *Pay for Your Pleasure* is paradigmatic, both in message and approach. Originally installed in a university hallway and designed to resemble college-event announcements, it is positioned against both the locale and language of traditional enlightenment. The work is quite literally a lesson in hollow idealism, in the discordance of theory and practice, fantasy and flesh. It is also a trap, carefully laid by the artist for unsuspecting viewers baited by the repeated affirmations of great thinkers. Contrasted with the real thing, romanticized criminality is rendered indefensible, and oppositions between lawlessness and lawfulness, savagery and civility, collapse. (Indeed, the work is yet another renunciation of the nature-culture polarity.) To drop a coin in the collection box is, in the end, an act of personal responsibility, an acknowledgment of this fundamental contradiction; it is a first step in the re-evaluation of hypocritical ideals.

Hence, what is most exceptional about the work of Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon is not only that it is redolent of a disenchanted point of view, but that it reinvigorates cultural discourse. Its didacticism stems from eliciting fresh internal debates, rather than preaching stale opinions. And whether termed grotesque, abject or

perverse, their demented humor is the engine that drives their work. As Sloterdijk puts it in one of his most inspired passages,

how much truth is contained in something can be best determined by making it thoroughly laughable and then watching to see how much joking around it can take. For truth is a matter that can stand mockery, that is freshened by any ironic gesture directed against it. Whatever cannot stand satire is false.<sup>30</sup>

The fact that so much of what is deemed normal or natural falls to pieces when confronted by these artists' irreverent wit speaks volumes about the vulnerability of those standards. It indicates how truly precarious our morals are. Despite society's investment in them, many of our most sacred ideals cannot withstand Kelley, McCarthy and Pettibon's trials-by-satire. The discomfort and anxiety experienced before their work is the result of booby traps set within it. Stuck without viable solutions, viewers are thus forced into reassessment. Fittingly, they are made to pay dearly for their pleasures.

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<sup>30</sup> Sloterdijk, 288.

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