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Paul McCarthy, *The Box*

Paul McCarthy, *The Box*, Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin. July 6 – November 4, 2012

Iliana Antonova

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Known for his transgressive and often violent performance-based video works, as well as his subversive sculptures, featuring caricatures of popular American icons, American artist Paul McCarthy's practice has consistently presented the public with works that reside 'outside the box' of the conventional.

Currently on display in the monumental space of Berlin's Neue Nationalgalerie is McCarthy's singular epic work, titled simply *The Box*. The work initially appears to be just this: an oversized wooden crate, which is positioned at an angle and placed to one side of the large gallery's interior.

From the very onset of stepping into the gallery, viewers find themselves occupying a dual space that simultaneously functions as both the interior space of the gallery and the exterior space of *The Box*. By offsetting the transparent glass walls of Mies van der Rohe's Neue Nationalgalerie with unforgiving materiality, McCarthy's work succeeds in inverting the 'boxes' that traditionally enact the role of containing artworks into a presentational context, thus heightening the viewers' awareness of occupying two distinct spatial frameworks simultaneously. This conflated position at once sets into motion the idea duality, an idea that is very much at the center of McCarthy's practice, and is certainly a prominent theme in the work presented here.

Not until one turns the corner of the large container is an access point revealed: through a window-sized opening in the back of the crate, one can view the contents of *The Box*. Containing an exact replica of the artist's studio complete with furniture and equipment, as well as unfinished works among an array of countless other objects; *The Box* puts forth a total simulacrum of the private as well as mythical space of the artist's

studio. Furthermore, the entirety of the box is tilted at a ninety-degree angle, whereby the floor assumes the position of the wall, and walls become the floor and ceiling and so forth. Functioning very much like a rotating film set, the gravity-defying environment calls for every object to be fixed in place, in effect establishing the work as an autonomously contained sculptural assemblage.

The very act of extending one's neck into the capsized container to take a closer look inevitably triggers a physically destabilizing effect. Through this simple gesture of engaging with the work by looking through the available portal, the viewer unconsciously assumes the role of one of McCarthy's popular 'box head' characters, which consistently have appeared in the artist's oeuvre, becoming manifest in such works as *Tomato Head* (1994), *Apple Head* (1996), and *Pot Head* (2002), among others. By situating the viewer in this vulnerable and rather absurdist position whilst peering into the private domain of the studio, the very act of looking becomes a conscious one. This relational condition brings to mind Duchamp's *Étant donnés* in which the viewer is similarly positioned as a voyeur, becoming 'caught in the act' of looking.

Although *The Box* puts forth an exact replica of the artist's studio, we are acutely aware that what is presented is a copy of the original. We imagine the studio as an amorphous site, which is in constant flux, thus we are witness to a copy of the original in a static moment in time, visible from a single vantage point. Functioning very much as a documentary image of the studio, *The Box* serves as a representation of a private domain that normally is closed off and inaccessible.

In his 1971 essay, "The Function of the Studio," Daniel Buren refers to the studio as an "envelope," which is "... the first frame, the first limit, upon which all subsequent frames/ limits will depend."¹ McCarthy calls our attention to the frame of the studio

through a physical re- representation of the site as re contextualized within the subsequent frame of the museum itself.

Certainly the idea of the tortured male genius working in isolation within the confines of his studio has prevailed as a popular notion for a very long time. The space of the studio can be juxtaposed with the mental space of the artist's mind and as such has become manifest as the subject of a number of notable works.

For example, in the late 60s Bruce Nauman filmed himself in the context of his studio, executing mundane, repetitive actions. In all of these videos, the studio appears as an empty space in which the artist's body acts as the singular medium. In *Manipulating the T-Bar* of 1966, Nauman films himself in the studio as he moves an oversized metal T-bar on his studio floor from one seemingly arbitrary position to another. It is interesting to note that in this video, Nauman sets up the camera at a ninety-degree angle, and in effect, appears to be walking on the wall, similar to the way in which we might imagine the absent artist walking on the wall of *The Box*. The transparent sincerity of Nauman's "body" of work operates in direct contrast to McCarthy's own tortured ascents into a studio-based masochism of the same period. What sets *The Box* apart from its surroundings of the larger box that houses it and from a characterization of McCarthy's practice itself is the enclosure of an unprecedented gesture of transparency, sincerity, and grace.

Iliana Antonova

Iliana Antonova is an independent curator and arts writer based in Montréal, Québec. She holds a degree in Art History from Concordia University and is the co-founding director of Silver Flag, an independently-run exhibition space in Montréal, which is dedicated to the presentation of rigorous solo exhibitions by notable Canadian and international artists. (www.silverflag.org)

Note

¹ Daniel Buren, "The Function of the Studio," 1971, October 10 (Fall 1972).



Paul McCarthy, *The Box*, 1999. Mixed Media, wood; 594 x 1666 x 404 cm.
Berlin State Museums, Friedrich Christian Flick Collection, in the Hamburger Bahnhof. © Paul McCarthy, Photos : Wolfgang Siesing.







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