

PAY FOR YOUR PLEASES

**MIKE
KELLEY**

**PAUL
MCCARTHY**

**RAYMOND
PETTIBON**

**EMMETT
CARBY LEVINE**

PAY FOR YOUR PLEASURES



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UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS | CHICAGO AND LONDON

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The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 60637

The University of Chicago Press, Ltd., London

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Printed in the United States of America

22 21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN-13: 978-0-226-02606-0 (cloth)

ISBN-13: 978-0-226-02623-7 (e-book)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Levine, Cary S., author.

Pay for your pleasures : Mike Kelley, Paul McCarthy, Raymond Pettibon / Cary Levine.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-226-02606-0 (cloth : alkaline paper) — ISBN 978-0-226-02623-7 (e-book) 1. Art, American—California, Southern—20th century. 2. Artists—California, Southern. 3. McCarthy, Paul, 1945– 4. Kelly, Mike, 1954–2012. 5. Pettibon, Raymond, 1957– I. Title.

N6530.C2L48 2013

709.2'2794—dc23

2012043151

Ⓢ This paper meets the requirements of ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992 (Permanence of Paper).

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Certain people have been essential. I would first like to thank Robert Storr, to whom I owe countless debts. This project originated in conversations with him and was nurtured along the way by numerous chats in museum offices, along city blocks, in bookstores, and over drinks and meals. I hope he never comes collecting. My dissertation advisor, Romy Golan, taught me how to transform my heap of ideas into scholarship. Her continued support and friendship have been indispensable, as have her guidance, encouragement, and unflagging critical acuity.

Of course, without Mike Kelley, Paul McCarthy, and Raymond Pettibon this project would not exist. I thank all three for the art that inspired me and the generous time, insights, and help they personally provided. I am also grateful to the people managing their respective studios and galleries, including Amy Baumann, Stacy Bengtson, Tanya Brodsky, Kate Costello, Jake Kean-Mayman, Louisa McCarthy, and especially Mary-Clare Stevens, who helped move things forward after Mike's untimely passing. I am sad that he will not see the final product.

I could not have dreamed of a better first-book editor than Susan Bielstein. She was an early enthusiast, and her subsequent professionalism, patience, encouragement, and sensitivity enabled me to make the project a reality. This book is significantly better because of her. Thank you also to Anthony Burton, Ruth Goring, Laura Avey, and the rest of the folks at the University of Chicago Press, along with Victoria Baker for her diligent indexing and Susan Hardy for her equally diligent transcribing. I would also like to thank my anonymous peer reviewers, whose incisive criticisms provoked crucial reconsiderations and revisions.

My outstanding colleagues in the Art Department at the University of North Carolina have offered consistent and unequivocal encouragement since I first arrived in Chapel Hill. This book also received financial support from a J. Paul Getty Postdoctoral Research Fellowship and a Junior Faculty Development Award from UNC. For their additional assistance and moral support, I would like to thank the following individuals: Todd Arky, Claire Bishop, Seth Bokser, John Bowles, Ashley Clay, Jay Curley, Alexander Dumbadze, Eric Elbogen, Heather Gendron, Jim Hirschfield, Josh Hockensmith, Mark Katz, Richard Langston, Carol Cole Levin, Carol Magee, Nell McClister, Max Owre, Todd Rosenberg, Sarah Sharma, Daniel Sherman, Mary Sheriff, Katie Siegel, Mary Sturgeon, Kurt Taroff, Jeff Whetstone, Gregory Williams, and Lisa Young. Extra-special thanks are due to the always "money" Philip Glahn, who helped preserve my sanity through all the ups and downs.

Without my family, 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, has

provided me with just about everything else. She is my sounding board and my cheering section, and her unwavering belief in me has carried me through every moment of self-doubt. Finally, I would like to thank Oliver and Maya for providing unconditional love, filling our home with curiosity and laughter, and always infusing life's "oys and joys" with healthy doses of silliness.

PAY FOR YOUR PLEASURES



INTRODUCTION

PAY FOR YOUR PLEASURES

Against a background of brushy evergreen trees, a pudgy man in red, white, and blue makeup and a pompom hat gazes down at an unseen child (plate 1). “I’m Pogo the Clown” reads the button on his striped costume. What might ordinarily be dismissed as the work of a second-rate Sunday painter is, on the contrary, anything but trivial. This diminutive oil-on-canvas-board is a self-portrait by John Wayne Gacy, the amicable Chicago businessman who viciously raped, tortured, and murdered thirty-three teenage boys, burying their bodies under the floorboards of his house.¹ 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.

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 work’s amateurish execution reinforces such a reading, its crudity a sign of the painter’s primitivism. Surely, we think, this is the product of a plainly uncivilized nature. If our curiosity is morbid, it is also somewhat safe. Aroused by the suggestion of absolute evil, we look at the monster’s pathetic painting without empathy, as if it were an alien specimen—that is, without any hint of recrimination. In the end, our condescension affirms our own moral well-being. Our normalcy opposes Gacy’s barbarity. We are not him.

Or are we?

Gacy’s painting was the main attraction of Mike Kelley’s installation *Pay for Your Pleasure*, first exhibited in 1988 at the Renaissance Center at the University of Chicago.² The clown was displayed in a glass case at the end of a long hallway wallpapered floor to ceiling with a procession of multicolored banners, each featuring a provocative quote and a portrait of the renowned poet, painter, or philosopher who penned it (plate 2). Together they form a chorus of enlightened faces and voices, singing paeans to creative freedom, to the artist’s immunity from natural and human law:³

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 WOVEN 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.
ANDRÉ BRETON

I WANT TO SING MURDER, FOR I LOVE MURDERERS.
[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

Long and repetitive, the installation is a litany of declarations of artistic lawlessness by members of the Western canon, from Plato to Michel Foucault. A special being, the artist is allowed and even expected to break rules. Indeed, Western art history has often been understood as a history of such transgression. The consenting visitor is thus blindsided by the peculiar painting at the end of the hallway. Gacy's self-portrait explodes the model of the transgressive artist, while stimulating the viewer's pleasure in seeing the handiwork of a psychopath. Can such a work ever be separated from the grisly deeds of its producer? Is the reality 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. The work of the real criminal betrays as idealistic rhetoric the hallway's chorale of epigrams and its "obviously overdone rationalization system," as Kelley puts it.⁴ The installation is didactic, yet the artist does not resort to straight polemics; unlike the lineup of great thinkers, he refuses to preach platitudes. Instead, he uses the viewer's own culturally constructed beliefs against themselves, provoking a clash between doctrine and practice, between calls to action and actual actions—art and life.⁵ The rhythmic reaffirmation of those beliefs by the work's pedagogic corridor makes the collision at the end all the more jarring.⁶ 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.⁷ Visitors are asked to not only acknowledge but also take some responsibility for a cultural legacy that validates their own perverse curiosity.⁸ They must literally pay for their pleasure.

Such effects characterize Kelley's eclectic body of work, which includes performance, installation, drawing, painting, video, and sculpture. Beginning in the early-1970s, he consistently pursued a strategy of entrapment, placing

viewers in paradoxical situations that confounded some of society's most entrenched values and norms. He was essentially an assemblage artist, archiving and rearranging objects, techniques, materials, and languages in ways that force theory and practice into direct confrontation with each other. His medium of choice was, above all, social meaning itself, and the artist even referred to his practice as "just like doing a research paper."⁹ Kelley's work goads viewers into rethinking categories that underlie a wide range of contemporary discourses, along with fundamental distinctions between normality and abnormality, good and bad, high and low, liberal and conservative, the natural and the unnatural. Cornered by his art, viewers must reevaluate some of their most deep-seated assumptions and beliefs.

Though stylistically distinct, fellow Los Angeles-area artists Paul McCarthy and Raymond Pettibon have used similar tactics since their early careers. They too exploit viewer expectations and presumptions in order to dislocate essential ideals. A key participant in the 1970s West Coast performance-art scene, McCarthy has over time aggressively challenged social boundaries, rules of propriety, and restrictions associated with the body. Obscenity, absurdity, disgust, and self-abuse are all tools in his arsenal; his work is often grueling for both the artist to enact and audiences to witness. Like Kelley, McCarthy exploits the social values embedded in everyday substances, and he has similarly described his approach as "a form of research."¹⁰ But whereas Kelley's gestures are generally dispassionate and cerebral, McCarthy's are riotous and antic. He stages orgiastic hyperindulgences in materials—most notably food products—misusing them in ways that pervert conventional classifications. Resituating ordinarily wholesome substances and behaviors within "indecent" scenarios—sexual, violent, scatological—the artist explores the ways in which ideals and standards are conditioned in the home, through institutions, and via mass media.

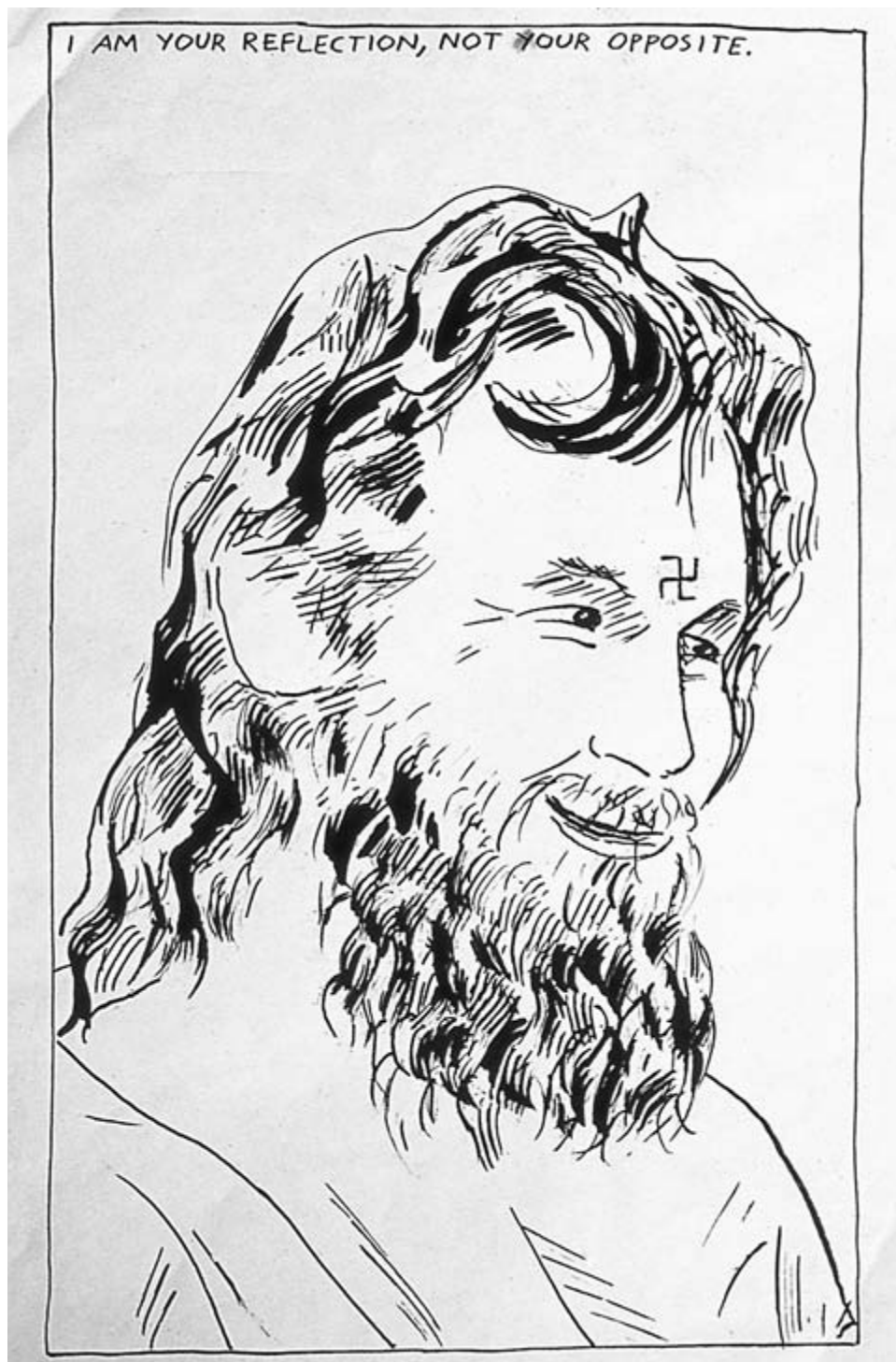
In *My Doctor* (1978; plate 3), McCarthy transformed familiar symbols of American domesticity and commodity culture into bodily matter and sexual stimulants. Stethoscope around his neck, he performed a depraved medical exam on an armless, life-size female mannequin, methodically dousing her in ketchup, margarine, ground beef, and moisturizing cream. Recontextualized, these common household products became blood, lubricant, fecal matter, and semen. Yet McCarthy repeatedly called attention to the true identities of his materials, taking them 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. Though obviously simulated, these acts felt truly psychopathic and misogynist. 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 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 in 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.

Raymond Pettibon's oeuvre, in contrast, consists mainly of pen-and-ink drawings, produced individually and as photocopied artist booklets or "zines." These drawings adhere to crude comiclike formats but abandon essential standards of the comic book—namely, sequential narrative and coherence between figure and text. Typically they are made up of single provocative images coupled to suggestive, often incongruous captions or quotes. The fragmentation that results effectively dislodges content, allowing for an open exchange between words and pictures. Pettibon's acerbic social commentaries emerge from this interplay 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. No single authoritative voice is established in Pettibon's world, and one is never sure who is saying what and to whom. His use of various handwritings and typefaces adds to the confusion, as different characters are associated with different scrawls, though none are named and few seem aware of their cohabitants on the page. Similar to Kelley and McCarthy, he manipulates meaning in ways that elicit eminently problematic responses, luring viewers in only to pull the rug out from under them.

An untitled Pettibon drawing from 1986 (fig. 0.1) portrays a Christ figure—long hair and beard, benevolent expression on his face—in the format of a religious icon. Only the faint swastika tattoo between his eyes betrays his true identity: this is not Jesus but cult leader Charles Manson, who, a dropout of the California dropout scene, led a group of followers to commit a series of high-profile murders in 1969. The setup establishes a conflict between format and subject matter, between connotations embedded in the visual language and those associated with the infamous murderer.¹¹ Just as McCarthy's *My Doctor* transformed wholesome Americana into gruesome abominations, Pettibon's drawing elicits a conflation of opposites—good and evil. This essential contradiction is a product of the ingrained meanings that charge its components as viewers are pressed to derive 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 drawing successfully preempts typical responses to the homicidal maniac—highlighting the complicity and condemnation that underlie one's curiosity and contempt.

The issue of artistic transgression explicitly raised by Kelley in his 1988 installation would resonate the following year, when US senator Jesse Helms launched his crusade against the National Endowment for the Arts.¹² While Helms and his cohorts singled out publicly funded artists such as Robert Mapplethorpe, Karen Finley, and Andres Serrano as evidence of the NEA's depravity, advocates of creative freedom reasserted the privileged status of art and the artist's inalienable right to express him or herself in the face of social norms. As Anthony Julius explains in *Transgressions: The Offences of Art*, "the implication [on the Left] was that the criminal law should play no part in the regulation of art and, more generally, that there should be no constraints either on the imagination . . . or on imaginative expression."¹³ The 1990 exhibition curated by artist Joseph Kosuth, *The Brooklyn Museum*



01.

Raymond Pettibon, No
Title (I am your),
1986. Courtesy Regen
Projects, Los Angeles
© Raymond Pettibon.

Collection: *The Play of the Unmentionable*, epitomized this position. Conceived in direct response to the NEA controversy, the show comprised artworks once seen as objectionable but now part of the institution's permanent collection, interspersed with an array of quotes on the theme of censorship. As the museum's director, Robert Buck, explained, it was "designed to protect our freedom of expression—the very essence of American spirit and the exact freedom for which so many have come to

these shores, abandoning loved ones and material possessions.”¹⁴ Though honorable, such arguments sidestep actual works of art, falling back on an aggrandized notion of the artist as an individual situated beyond morality’s grasp—a myth that, as *Pay for Your Pleasure* suggests, can flourish only within the rarefied discourse of art, and is as ideological as its reactionary counterpart. Often treated as dogma, that myth is in fact, Julius points out, “ahistorical, indifferent to the varieties of the transgressive, and sentimental in its attachment to a notion of transgression as liberating for both artist and audience.”¹⁵ It lets art’s supporters off the hook while characterizing opponents as ignoramuses.

Kelley’s willingness to take on the art appreciator rather than just the art censor actually seems to offer a more balanced critique of the “culture wars” of the 1980s and 90s. As he himself explained, *Pay for Your Pleasure* was a response to those on both sides of the political spectrum who do not differentiate between symbolic action and direct action. “The artist is often considered to be a criminal,” Kelley points out, “but the artist isn’t killing people. It’s the normal guy who’s out killing people.”¹⁶ The work can also be linked to some of the more nuanced theoretical positions that emerged around this time. In his 1992 *Bitter Carnival: “Ressentiment” and the Abject Hero*, for example, Michael André Bernstein challenges the doctrine of unfettered creative expression. Like Kelley, Bernstein criticizes as reductive the modernist adulation of “any radical subversion of normative codes.” Bernstein argues that this has led to real-life moral relativism, a breakdown of authority and a destabilization of the social order.¹⁷ Kelley, however, avoids the moral seesaw by holding two contradictory views in suspension.

McCarthy and Pettibon can likewise be described as simultaneously transgressive and antitransgressive. Or, put more precisely, all three artists are transgressive in their refusal to blindly accept established myths of artistic transgression. Whereas they openly reject the notion of “autonomous” art—their work is wholly grounded in the sociopolitical—they also amplify the distinctions between art and life, distinctions that have so often been blurred both by art’s champions and by its detractors. Each breach these artists commit is therefore countered, usually within the same work, by additional breaches that reveal the limitations, if not the counterproductivity, of the first. The trap is thus laid for the viewer, who is left stuck between such contradictory breaches—disturbed or mortified on the one hand, but shown the absurdity, cognitive dissonance, or sheer hypocrisy of that reaction on the other. Disrupting the ways in which behaviors, things, and symbols—artistic and otherwise—are categorized and politicized, the work of Kelley, McCarthy, and Pettibon is often as critical of those who violate taboos in the name of liberation as of those who seek to maintain a repressive status quo.

Activated by audience response, such work reflects a distinct shift in the approach to cultural politics—in art and in society at large—rooted in a pivotal historical moment. Crystallizing in the mid-1970s, these artists’ distinctive aversion to fixed positions and utopian programs can be tied to the immediate aftermath of the preceding counterculture era—the post-Watergate, post-Vietnam moment, when, as curator Paul Schimmel recently put it, “disillusionment had eclipsed ‘California Dreamin’” and hippie optimism.”¹⁸

However, their work is not simply a response to some monolithic notion of “the 60s” and its supposed demise; in fact, it actively resists such historical for-

02.

Raymond Pettibon, No Title (This is 1968), *Tripping Corpse Four*, cover, 1984. Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles © Raymond Pettibon.

TRIPPING CORPSE FOUR

Raymond Pettibon



SST PUBS

\$1.25

mulations. In a 1984 Pettibon drawing, for example, a frenzied hippie brandishes bloody knives, stabbing wildly at an unseen victim (fig. 0.2). “THIS IS 1968, NOT 1967,” its caption explains. On the one hand, the work is an unforgiving commentary on the capriciousness of the counterculture, on how readily the peace-and-love generation abandoned its ideals. Yet, produced nearly twenty years after the fact, it also reflects a time when this supposed slide from utopia to dystopia was itself a cliché. Pettibon’s exaggeratedly violent scene and precise date-splitting are facetious—as if once that chronological threshold was crossed, such brutality somehow made sense; as if people actually think and act in terms of historical trends. The drawing is less about the 1960s per se than about the packaging of history into neatly delineated periods based on simplistic accounts of what happened when.

Indeed, no era has been packaged and repackaged so much as the 60s has. By the mid-1970s, its mythologies had been fully established; by the 1980s, they were entrenched. Liberals often romanticized the period as a time of peaceful marches, sit-ins, teach-ins, and love-ins, when motives were pure, sex was safe, and music was groovy—a view that was, in Pettibon’s terms, decidedly more 1967 than 1968. Conservatives turned “the 60s” into an epithet, denouncing it as the source of an ongoing cultural decline. This latter account became increasingly dominant in the 1980s, as the Right secured its grip on American politics and culture. The Reagan administration’s rhetoric on everything from the economy to social programs and education was based on a pseudohistorical trajectory in which the upheavals of the 60s—the student movement, civil rights, feminism, rock and roll—were blamed for a dramatic 70s decline, necessitating an 80s rebirth, a new “Morning in America.”¹⁹ A return to the “normalcy” of the 1950s would restore moral stability and responsibility, redeeming history and promising better things to come.

This regressivism was, of course, no less fanciful than the wide-eyed progressivism it counteracted, and yet the rift between pro-60s and anti-60s forces persisted. In 1998 social critic and historian Mark Lilla observed that the Right continues to blame the 60s for a perceived erosion of American “family values,” public authority, and individual morality, while the Left clings to antiquated tactics, calling for a return to 60s-type social programs and activism without conceding previous failures. Neither side acknowledges that the student movement and the Reagan movement actually stemmed from a common utopian faith in democratic individualism—that these two “revolutions” have, as Lilla put it, “proved complementary, not contradictory.”²⁰ Pettibon himself recognizes this convergence: “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.”²¹

Some cultural critics realized early on that a frank reassessment of the 60s was needed. In the 1984 anthology *The 60s without Apology*, contributors lamented the “trashing of the 60s,” implied by the Right’s promotion of traditional values and “excellence” in public schools, its antifeminist, antigay, and antiunion positions, its attempt to dismantle the welfare state, and its general denunciation of “permissiveness.”²² (The book’s title alone shows how prescriptive the anti-60s position had become by the early 80s.) Equally troubling to them, however, was the Left’s

tendency to respond by either exaggerating the achievements of the era or bemoaning its missed opportunities. As Fredric Jameson argued in his contribution to the volume, we should no longer search for the “true” 60s to replace prevailing accounts—no new “periodization”—but rather examine the ways in which “its opportunities and failures were inextricably intertwined.”²³

Published the same year as *The 60s without Apology*, Pettibon’s “1968” drawing contests such periodization even while it openly satirizes counterculture ideals. It belongs to this moment of reassessment, as do a range of similarly oriented works by Kelley and McCarthy. Adopting disenchanted points of view, these artists have challenged both the popular politics of the era and the retardation of public discourse perpetuated by enduring 60s mythologies. This point of view has informed their more general approach to cultural politics, to which traditional affiliations cannot easily be applied, since really it is not these artists’ own opinions that are asserted. Designed to avoid the inevitable pitfalls of ideological certainty and idealism, their mode of critique represents a cheeky repoliticization of art. Resorting neither to direct activism nor to its reactionary condemnation, Kelley, McCarthy, and Pettibon all individually seem to ravage convictions on the Left and the Right, treating them as mutually reinforcing sides of the same coin. Rather than preach or simply shock, they set traps, ensnaring the viewer in discomfiting and often irresolvable situations—psychological, moral, and aesthetic. Reproaches boomerang.

This book weaves together three independent but related stories. Tracing the development of these artists’ work from the late 1960s through 1990s, it links that work both to highly specific contexts and to more general shifts in perspective and attitude. Kelley, McCarthy, and Pettibon were selected not because they are the only ones representative of such shifts but because they offer especially affecting, interconnected examples. Their work is exceptional in its poignancy and its breadth of subject matter, including some of the most divisive cultural issues of the contemporary era. This book situates that work within social, political, and art history.

All three artists have had major museum retrospectives—Kelley in 1993, McCarthy in 2000, Pettibon in 1998—accompanied by sizable exhibition catalogues.²⁴ Other scholarship has primarily taken the form of magazine and journal articles, single-artist monographs, and additional exhibition-related publications. Most of the literature considers each artist separately with only occasional nods to the links between them; the few exceptions tend to be exceedingly broad in scope, the foremost example being Paul Schimmel’s landmark exhibition and catalogue *Helter Skelter: LA Art in the 1990s* (1992). That 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—Chris Burden, Lynn Foulkes, Liz Larner, Charles Ray, Nancy Rubins, and Robert Williams among them—who, according to Schimmel, made work that “portrays the darker side of contemporary life—visions in which alienation, obsessions, dispossession, or perversity either dominate the landscape or form a disruptive undercurrent.”²⁵ The catalogue expanded the approach by juxtaposing the work of these artists with that of ten other LA-based poets and authors, including Charles Bukowski, Dennis Cooper, and Amy Gerstler. My book takes a different

tack. Limited to three artists, it focuses on an approach to artmaking that not only unifies them but distinguishes them from those who take up similar themes or may otherwise appear like-minded.

This study also contextualizes the work of Kelley, McCarthy, and Pettibon within the history of the issues they engage, something that others have initiated but that has as yet not been fully realized. Three monographs published by Phaidon Press as part of its Contemporary Artists series provide important precedents for this contextualization. Offering the most extensive surveys of their careers, each lead essay places its artist within larger social and cultural frameworks. In “Mr. McCarthy’s Neighborhood” (1996), Ralph Rugoff relates McCarthy’s performances and videos not only to the history of art but also to contemporary film, television, and other forms of mass media.²⁶ In “The Mike Kelleys” (1999), John C. Welchman sticks mostly to Kelley’s relationship to his art-historical predecessors and peers, yet he distinguishes the artist’s methods from those of others, while identifying most of the major social and cultural themes present in his art.²⁷ 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.²⁸ 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,” Kelley and McCarthy among them.²⁹

Such texts stand apart from those that attempt to affix these artists to particular theoretical models. In “Raymond Pettibon: Return to Disorder and Disfiguration” (1998), for example, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh interprets the artist’s drawings in terms of “the modernist credo of de-skilling.”³⁰ To Buchloh, the interplay of image and text in Pettibon’s art negates communication, rather than reinvigorating it through a novel approach. He identifies a critique of contemporary visual culture in Pettibon’s work, but he glosses over the specific content of that work and its social connotations. In *Formless: A User’s Guide* (1996), Rosalind Krauss and Yves-Alain Bois evaluate Kelley via Georges Bataille’s notion of *l’informe*, rooted as it is in a disruption of order via the dissolution of categories. Arguing that Kelley’s work is subversive “through the structural operations of the lower-than-low”—that is, by way of its essential formlessness and indeterminacy—the authors disaffiliate themselves from “the discourse of the art world, with its insistence on themes and substances.”³¹ (In an especially curious passage, they claim that Kelley’s use of Bataille in *Pay for Your Pleasure* confirms an explicit connection between the two—as if the installation were meant to affirm, rather than problematize, the philosopher’s quote.) Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection has been similarly evoked—and in fact both Kristeva and Bataille have often been linked to strategies of repulsion and debasement in contemporary art generally.³² Such accounts certainly shed light on the structural and psychosexual dynamics of the work of Kelley, McCarthy, and Pettibon and its confrontations with the ideological, yet they tend to overlook, and at times plainly deny, the specificity of these artists’ references and the political and cultural significance of those references—the “themes and substances” that Bois and Krauss determinedly avoid. If their work can be linked to theories of the object or *l’informe*, its direct engagement with American mass culture belongs to

the lineage of pop art, and it is in that sense that their work functions as pointed, if fundamentally ambivalent, critique. The current study attempts to be flexible in methodology and more attuned to those connotations and their rich social contexts.

The book is structured in two parts. The first charts these artists' intellectual and artistic development, from their early influences, educational experiences, and work to the full maturation of their styles and methods. It identifies the roots of their approaches and situates their art both within the shifting cultural landscape of 1970s and 80s America and within their particular social and artistic milieus. Though each artist is treated individually in a separate chapter, distinct similarities emerge between them. An overall picture appears in which the development of their fragmented and multifarious artistic languages coincides with a growing interest in the politics of entrenched thought-systems—the ways in which norms, conventions, and ideals are socially conditioned—as opposed to the politics of fixed positions. Not only do all three artists use unexpected combinations of categories and the de- and re-contextualization of the familiar to destabilize meaning, but they arrive at that approach in response to analogous cultural trends. Correspondences can therefore be made, for instance, between McCarthy's search for an alternative to the notion of "performance as a concrete reality" in the early 1970s, Kelley's discomfort with the "photo-text" conceptualism he encountered at Cal Arts a few years after, and Pettibon's ambivalent relationship to his own punk scene later in the decade. Each artist rejected a type of realism connoted by formal simplicity, directness, and anti-aesthetics, turning instead to an art of confusion, ideological ambiguity, crass humor, and contradiction. Each shifted attention to the viewer's own culturally constructed values.

These chapters also explore Kelley's, McCarthy's, and Pettibon's links to certain post-60s music scenes. Indeed, the primary development of their artistic voices coincided with their most concentrated involvement in music—a subject that has so far received scant attention.³³ All three spent their formative years involved in scenes known for blurring boundaries between music and art; each has played in "art bands" that employ noise and humor in order to shred rock music norms. As a member of Destroy All Monsters, a seminal mid-1970s group in the Detroit area, Kelley originally considered himself a musician first, an artist second. McCarthy has been interested in experimental music since his student days in the late-1960s, and he worked with a number of Los Angeles-based bands throughout the 1970s. The groups with which both Kelley and McCarthy were involved were influenced by a contrarious American musical countercurrent of the late 1960s and early 1970s—an affront to mainstream rock and roll. Pettibon was affiliated with a late-70s and early-80s Los Angeles-based derivation of punk that attempted to repoliticize popular music while openly rejecting hippie utopianism. Though he adopted punk's crude aesthetic and do-it-yourself ethic, he was hostile toward its grandiose political pretenses, which he saw as a recuperation of the very counterculture ideals it spurned. Arriving in LA during punk's ascension there, Kelley similarly saw it as a recycling of 60s-era rock rebellion, though in inverted form. All three artists resist the perpetuation of such defunct rebelliousness. Their turn to alternative modes of critique—and the development of their artistic styles in general—cannot be fully contextualized unless we

consider their connections to certain forms of music and music-based subcultures that emerged in the wake of the 1960s.

This book's investment in such biographic details is not simply a return to the myth of the preordained genius Artist. As will be shown, the early careers of Kelley, McCarthy, and Pettibon were characterized less by extraordinary intuition and resolve than by uncertainty, shifting priorities, and readjusted directions. Their formative years were, in many respects, not exceptional. This book plots the circuitous and rather casual routes these artists took and the vicissitudes of their local contexts, identifying the wide diversity of forces—high and low, canonical and marginal, artistic and nonartistic, fringe and mainstream—that played vital, but often conflicting, roles in their development. Such accounts implicitly contest entrenched notions of artistic genius, along with clichés of “school” and “movement.” It is significant, for instance, that Kelley was simultaneously interested in White Panther political activism, social psychology, modernist art, Iggy Pop, experimental jazz, and craft; that McCarthy came from a Mormon background, played in various noise-rock bands, and initially pursued painting; that Pettibon spent much of his youth reading Henry James and listening to punk. Such details combine to provide more complete pictures of the artists, while nuancing the relationships between their early art and their early milieus. It also helps explain the range of ambivalences—ideological and artistic—that have remained essential to their work ever since.

This microscopic approach, particularly that of the book's first three chapters, is based on the view that art is the product of specific time, place, and person. In order to chart the convergence of eclectic interests and experiences that shaped their emerging practices, we must first determine, as precisely as possible, each artist's trajectory—what happened when, and under what circumstances. To accomplish this, the book relies on a combination of primary sources, contemporaneous documents, and recollections conveyed by Kelley, McCarthy, and Pettibon themselves in previously published interviews and direct conversations with the author. Though hardly unproblematic, these sources help establish what particular issues were at stake for these artists and in what ways such issues influenced their development. We can then talk about them together without falling into the traps of grand narrative or zeitgeist; we can say something about this grouping while retaining the individuality of each. In fact, that individuality renders the correlations between their trajectories all the more meaningful.

Each of the first three chapters thus represents a kind of counterhistory, or what Kelley referred to as a “minor history”—not quantitatively or qualitatively inferior, but distinct from more established accounts founded upon rigid divisions and tidy chronicles.³⁴ In his monograph on artist-filmmaker-musician Tony Conrad, Branden Joseph borrows and builds upon Kelley's term, linking it to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's notion of “minor science” and “minor literature” and using it as the methodological basis of just such an inquiry. Unlike “major” histories, minor ones are not told according to entrenched constants—movements, disciplines, styles, genres, mediums—and therefore do not seek to force heterogeneous developments into homogeneous categories. Yet they remain in what Kelley refers to as a “parasitic” relation to those constants, touching upon and feeding on them, but never containable by them. As Joseph explains:

A minor history should not be confused with a history of isolated developments, the idiolects of a naïve artist or practitioner of a sort of art brut. Neither is a minor history devoted to those figures that strive for self-containment, movements unto themselves . . . Even less is it an anonymous history. “Minor” figures have a tendency to remain known; they do not pass entirely out of the historical record. But their trajectory through history takes a different direction from that of “major” artists. A minor history represents a different sort of development, which impacts or passes by each categorical point, each acknowledged grouping. . . . If “minor” artists retain a place within major history—sometimes a central place—it is on account of their relation of proximity to the movements and categories engendered by major history and because of the unceasing pressure that they exert upon them.³⁵

Notwithstanding the centrality of their work in today’s art world, Kelley, McCarthy, and Pettibon are minor artists in exactly this sense. Like Conrad, they have passed through history in parasitic relation to major movements and categories, upon which their work exerts constant pressure.

These artists’ involvement with music is therefore especially crucial. It not only had an important impact on their development but indicates an expansive, interdisciplinary conception of art, consistent throughout their careers—and extending to literature and film as well—yet scarcely acknowledged, if at all, in the historical reception of their work. The lack of emphasis on that crossbreeding in the various monographs and exhibitions on them betrays an ongoing overreliance on established modes of thought; such crossbreeding has, in Joseph’s terms, “proved unassimilable to the categories existing within both the art institution and institutionalized art history.”³⁶ The minor histories presented here defy the cultural and intellectual assumptions that underlie the divisions between the disciplines and mediums, the ways in which the field is conventionally constructed and construed.

Such histories also buck enduring stereotypes and mythologies, the “pop-sociological hypotheses” that, as Thomas Crow recently pointed out, “have constantly distorted discussion of art in Los Angeles.”³⁷ These include a range of reductive binaries—East Coast–West Coast, utopia-dystopia, Southern California–Northern California, artifice-reality, sunshine-noir—as well as overstated parallels between the city itself, with its sprawling topography and prominent entertainment industries, and its diverse artistic production. Seeking site specificity rather than regionalism, this book investigates several local art and music scenes but deliberately avoids treating Los Angeles as a monolithic entity.³⁸ The coexistence of those scenes is proof of the city’s very multiplicity. Rather than propose that Kelley, McCarthy, and Pettibon represent a singular place, moment, or movement, the present study registers common sensibilities and intersecting positions while preserving these artists’ status as independent “minor” figures. Indeed, that minority is integral to their work and its (major) historical significance.

The second part of the book broadens the scope of this examination by focusing on select sociopolitical issues addressed by all three artists and rooted in their early careers. These thematic “case studies” show how the tactics they developed in the 1970s manifested themselves in art over the following two decades, and how that art functioned against the backdrop of culture wars and identity politics that riddled discourse on both the Left and the Right in America during that time. This

section solidifies particular commonalities while articulating some of the ways in which their work is distinct from that of others who also confront the problems at hand.

The book stops tracking Kelley, McCarthy, and Pettibon in the mid to late 1990s. This limit both provides critical distance from the art in question and allows for a more focused analysis of it. The methodological and thematic similarities between these artists were particularly strong during the 1980s and 90s, and together their work is especially redolent of several broad social and cultural issues of that period. I would also suggest that their work has changed in significant ways since then and that they generally diverged from each other, pursuing fresh concerns beyond the scope of this study and the historical specificity it seeks.

Chapter 4 focuses on the relationship between Kelley, McCarthy, and Pettibon's art and the profound uncertainty and increasing complexity that characterizes contemporary gender politics. Engaging masculinity as well as femininity, their work presents gender identity as mobile, culturally conditioned, and artificially confined by notions of the natural and the normal. Acknowledging the paradoxical status of their own positions as male artists, they underscore the intractability of patriarchal power even as they seek to undermine it. Their self-critical treatment of masculinity provides a way to address the intricacies of gender, elaborated in the ways in which Kelley, McCarthy, and Pettibon similarly combine repulsion and desire, perversity and normalcy, to disrupt established sexual ideals. As discussed in chapter 5, rather than simply advocate sexual liberation over repression, all three artists contest the pervasive politicization of sex that underlay both the "sexual revolution" of the 1960s and 70s and the reactionary "sex panics" of the 1980s and 90s—battles over AIDS, gay rights, contraception, abortion, the public funding of "obscene" art, and adolescent promiscuity. Chapter 5 situates their work within the evolving, and often contradictory, sexual discourse of the post-60s era. Thus we see how it departs from rigidly polarized platforms of the time informed by this repression-liberation binary and from alternatives such as social constructionist theory or sexual pluralism.

Chapter 6 expands the discussion to consider their recurring and particularly noteworthy focus on youth—both early childhood and adolescence. Kelley, McCarthy, and Pettibon consistently portray youth as a time of confusion and conflict rather than innocence and insight. They reject America's "cult of childhood," which not only inspired the 60s counterculture but is rooted in the country's earliest history and continues to inform its cultural politics—liberal and conservative. These artists also target the very processes of conditioning by which children are made to conform to accepted norms. By denaturalizing such norms and processes, they dislodge conventions that underlie the politics of youth, sex, gender, and identity in general. This chapter thus also serves as the book's conclusion. Kelley, McCarthy, and Pettibon's youth-oriented work not only establishes a strong bond between them but demonstrates at the core of each artists' oeuvre a demystified notion of human nature and its relationship to culture.

Underlying this book's analyses is an understanding of these artists' works as fundamentally grotesque. Involving the indivisible combination of supposedly incompatible elements, the grotesque dislocates categories that engender conventions and their violation. In *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* (1957), Wolfgang Kay-

ser describes it as a “fusion of realms which we know to be separated,” producing a “contrast that ominously permits of no reconciliation.”³⁹ In *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (1986), Peter Stallybrass and Allon White distinguish between the simple inversion of social-cultural hierarchies, which they see as largely ineffectual, and the grotesque amalgamations that more potently disrupt the very authority of those hierarchies.⁴⁰ Most incisive, however, is Geoffrey Galt Harpham’s 1982 study *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature*, which characterizes the grotesque as essentially a methodological challenge, a mechanism that upends “our ways of organizing the world.”⁴¹ “We apprehend the grotesque,” Harpham explains, “in the presence of an entity—an image, object, or experience—simultaneously justifying multiple mutually exclusive interpretations which commonly stand in relation of high to low, human to subhuman, divine to human, normative to abnormal.”⁴² Whereas Kayser recognizes only the ominous qualities of the grotesque, Harpham argues that it can be regenerative too.⁴³ It is often repulsive and alluring, destructive and constructive, at the same time. Harpham’s enthusiasm is distinct, however, from Mikhail Bakhtin’s largely nostalgic and utopian vision of “grotesque realism,” put forth in *Rabelais and His World*.⁴⁴ If Kayser overlooks its positive potential, Bakhtin underestimates “the force of alienation in the grotesque.”⁴⁵ Effecting an irreconcilable clash of theory and practice, the grotesque ultimately results in pointed and unresolvable—but not unproductive—discombobulation.

Hence the distinction between McCarthy’s absurdist performances and, say, the cathartic work of the Vienna Actionists or Carolee Schneemann, both of whom are regularly cited as precedents to his orgiastic routines. In the early 1960s Actionist Hermann Nitsch initiated his *Orgien Mysterien Theater* spectacles, involving disemboweled animals, fake crucifixions, nudity, music, wild dancing, and intoxication, intended as communal rituals of euphoric abandon. In a 1983 article, Thomas McEvilley links McCarthy to Nitsch’s “shamanic” approach, with its emphasis on the redemptive powers of primitive initiation ritual and Dionysian revelry. In McCarthy’s work, he argues, “self-mutilation, female imitation, and the performance of taboo acts are combined in a structure roughly parallel to [that of the Vienna Actionists].”⁴⁶ Yet McEvilley neglects crucial differences, like the fact that, unlike Nitsch’s carnivalesque rituals, McCarthy’s acts are ludicrous, satirical, and humorous, his materials overtly fake. As the artist himself has explained, “Vienna is not Los Angeles. My work came out of kids’ television in Los Angeles. . . . People make reference to Viennese art without really questioning the fact that there’s a big difference between ketchup and blood. I never thought of my work as shamanistic. My work is more about being a clown than a shaman.”⁴⁷ In his 2000 essay “Exaggeration and Degradation: Grotesque Humour in Contemporary Art,” Roger Malbert describes this clowning as wholly devoid of redemptive intentions. “Framed by the banalities of suburban American consumer society,” Malbert argues, McCarthy’s work “negates all aspirations toward mystical transmutation.”⁴⁸

Indeed, a primary generative force in the work of Kelley, McCarthy, and Pettibon is humor—and specifically grotesque humor, at once pleasurable and disturbing. In a 1984 essay, Umberto Eco distinguishes between such humor and the more straightforward “comedy,” which, he argues, is always condescending, directed outward toward someone or something inferior or repulsive. Comedy reinforces social norms that must first be accepted if they are to be transgressed. In tragedy

the reader or spectator suffers with the hero, whereas in comedy “only the others, the Barbarians, are supposed to pay.”⁴⁹ In humor, though, the reader or spectator is stuck halfway between the two, and the laughter is self-incriminating:

We smile because of the contradiction between the character and the frame the character cannot comply with. But we are no longer sure that it is the character who is at fault. Maybe the frame is wrong. . . . Thus the performance of humor acts as a form of social criticism. Humor is always, if not metalinguistic, metasemantic: through verbal language or some other sign system it casts in doubt other cultural codes. . . . Humor does not promise us liberation: on the contrary, it warns us about the impossibility of global liberation, reminding us of the presence of a law that we no longer have reason to obey. In doing so it undermines the law. It makes us feel the uneasiness of living under a law—any law.⁵⁰

Eco’s conception recalls that of Charles Baudelaire, who more than a century earlier similarly privileged the grotesque. To Baudelaire, the grotesque is genuinely and profoundly disconcerting, as opposed to the relatively facile and benign “comic.”⁵¹ In response to comedy, we laugh at the expense of another; faced with the grotesque, he reminds us, “the wise man laughs only with fear and trembling.”⁵²

The grotesque is the essential mechanism in Kelley, McCarthy, and Pettibon’s common strategy of entrapment. It is ideally suited to produce such an effect, for, as Robert Storr explains, the conflicts provoked by the grotesque “must in some fashion already exist within the mind of the beholder such that the confusion stems not only from the anomaly to which we bear witness in the world, but the anomaly that is revealed within us”—and it is in this sense that their work can be considered critique.⁵³ In his 1989 article “Foul Perfection: Thoughts on Caricature,” Kelley distinguishes between the grotesque and caricature, terms often used interchangeably: “In caricature, distortion serves a specific purpose, in most cases to defame, while in the grotesque it is done for its own sake, as a formalized displacement of parts. Its only purpose is to surprise the viewer.”⁵⁴ Whereas Kelley, McCarthy, and Pettibon certainly make use of caricature, their work does not serve a “specific purpose” (i.e., it is not subsumed by a particular political agenda). It instead involves what Harpham calls “corrupted or shuffled familiarity.”⁵⁵ Distortion is more often conceptual than physical in their work, the result of deliberate misappropriation: Gacy placed in the context of avant-gardism, for example; ketchup in the context of sex and violence; Manson in the context of Christian iconography. Like Kelley, Harpham acknowledges the simplicity of the grotesque’s core effect—the word *grotesque*, he explains, “implies . . . the impossibility of finding a synonym, nothing more”—while emphasizing the multiplicity of problems it can nevertheless produce.⁵⁶ The “surprises” produced by Kelley, McCarthy, and Pettibon not only throw presumably stable and long cherished ideals into crisis but place the onus squarely on the viewer, who completes the work simply by bringing his or her conditioned responses to it but cannot easily be disentangled from its contradictions. As Kelley has pointed out elsewhere, “If you resist it, that’s understandable, but if you try to argue with it, you have dealt yourself a losing hand.”⁵⁷

The grotesque work of Kelley, McCarthy, and Pettibon represents a kind of anti-utopian consciousness-raising distinct from much of the cultural discourse of the time. Historian and former SDS leader Todd Gitlin describes post-60s politics as “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 the politics of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. “The result,” Gitlin concludes, “is petty—and sometimes more than petty—aggression and deafness, an obsession with purifications.”⁵⁸ The Right, meanwhile, has adopted a similarly stifling type of reductivism, founded upon absolute, Manichaeian oppositions: right versus wrong, good versus evil, us versus them.

The alternative approach to cultural politics embraced by Kelley, McCarthy, and Pettibon is closer to the “critique of cynical reason” advocated by German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk in his 1983 book of that title. Sloterdijk posits the cheeky humor and buffoonery of ancient Greek *kynicism* as a counterstrategy to the cynicism of a post-60s culture faced with a legacy of failed progressivism.⁵⁹ Recognizing the artificiality of accepted values but resigned to follow along anyway, the contemporary cynic is “afflicted with the compulsion to put up with preestablished relations that it finds dubious, to accommodate itself to them, and finally even to carry out their business.” Equally disenchanted but unwilling to remain complacent, the *kynic* seeks out inconsistencies within ideological convictions, lashing out against this “enlightened false consciousness,” against a contemporary sensibility numb to conventional critique, functional but disheartened and in denial, “well-off and miserable at the same time.”⁶⁰ The objective is not to promote “true” as opposed to “false” consciousness but to hold multiple antagonistic consciousnesses at once, to draw attention to that which does not fit grand theories.⁶¹ This “art of pissing against the idealist wind,” Sloterdijk contends, represents “a kind of argumentation . . . that, to the present day, respectable thinking does not know how to deal with.”⁶² The result is a fresh type of cultural and political discourse—neither conventionally conservative nor conventionally liberal—which refuses to capitulate while ever abandoning the hope for permanent resolution or transcendence.⁶³

Sloterdijk’s theory emerged from a West German context quite distinct from its American counterpart, but it nonetheless resonates in the work of Kelley, McCarthy, and Pettibon, which similarly eschews outdated dichotomies, positing multiple antagonistic viewpoints at once and frustrating the “obsession with purifications” identified by Gitlin. The perpetuation of an obsolete leftism, their works suggest, is therefore as bad as, or at times even worse than, the conservatism it rails against. For these artists, the only possible freedom is a freedom from the illusion of freedom, from the cynicism of “enlightened false consciousness.” Their common strategy of grotesque entrapment produces a muddled view that is actually, in the end, the clearer one. Whereas they repeatedly tackle issues of identity, their work can hardly be characterized as identity politics in any conventional sense of the term. Again, it is impossible to pin down where exactly these artists stand in relation to the issues they raise; their criticisms are caustic but relatively impartial—sometimes gallingly so. They choose calculated instigation rather than reformation, troublemaking instead of problem solving. Viewers must reassess their own values rather than judge the artist’s. They must pay for their pleasures.

ONE

PAUL MCCARTHY: MAKING CAR CRASHES

Born in 1945, Paul McCarthy was raised a Mormon in a middle-class Salt Lake City neighborhood that was both ordinary and peculiar. As the artist explains: “A California contractor had the idea to build a giant suburb where veterans could buy houses capitalizing on the GI loans; he built three streets then went bankrupt. The houses were all similar. At my parents’ house, when you went out the back door, there were no other houses for miles, it was vacant landscape. When you went out the front door you were staring at a street in the suburbs, it was like a film set, built only for the cameras.”¹ McCarthy acknowledges that his work “can be seen as a reaction to Salt Lake conservatism,” but it was never a conscious response to his upbringing, and he cautions that too much focus on his Mormon background can be misleading. Though he has described the community in which he grew up as “religious and isolated” and virtually devoid of any mention of sex,² it was, he insists, no more repressive than any other typical 1950s American town. His parents were relatively liberal and open minded, and they encouraged him to make art from early on.³

Suffering from dyslexia, McCarthy struggled with his academics, and as an alternative he was put into art classes. One teacher taught literature and art, and it was through him that McCarthy was exposed to Picasso, Henry Moore, and other modernists, along with poets such as Allen Ginsberg. He was also drawn to the experimental music of John Cage and Karlheinz Stockhausen—an interest inspired by the beatnik friends he made in art class. An eleventh-grade painting teacher introduced him to the work of Käthe Kollwitz, Edvard Munch, and the Ashcan School. He was especially taken with the latter, and in response he made a series of cruddy realist paintings of depressed people and urban blight—a stark contrast to his own pristine Rocky Mountain locale.⁴

Indeed, McCarthy remembers sensing at a young age that there was something askew about his idyllic milieu and its institutions—the church certainly, but also the schools and the community at large. He felt that he was living in a “Shangri-La,” he recalls, “with some sort of underbelly that I couldn’t put my finger on.”⁵ He was enthralled with the image of the vagabond, celebrated by a beat-inflected rock-climbing subculture suitable to the Salt Lake City area, which he discovered in mountaineering magazines and books in the early to mid-1960s. To McCarthy, that subculture represented an alternative lifestyle, an “art life,” as he puts it.⁶ He also had a group of prankster friends, some of whose jokes McCarthy still considers quite complex and intriguing: “I remember this one guy asked for a saw for Christmas, and we always thought that was crazy; he wanted a saw. And then

he built his own dresser drawers. And then he invited all of his friends to see the dresser drawers, and the dresser drawers were completely fucked up—leaning . . . and all the drawers were crooked. . . . It was a prank, but sophisticated in some weird way.”⁷

After graduating high school, McCarthy attended Weber State, a junior college in Ogden, Utah. He pursued his interest in art, primarily under the tutelage of Doyle Strong, whose work ranged from pop-oriented paintings that engaged American consumerism to Tachisme-style constructions made by embedding everyday objects into poured concrete.⁸ Strong taught his students a technique that involved painting with polymer paint and then covering the finished image with Varithane, a polyurethane varnish that would amplify the underlying colors. McCarthy made some paintings—mostly still lifes—in this manner but soon deviated from the formula. He poured a whole can of Varithane onto a large sheet of Masonite set into a wood underframe—basically the same structure that Strong used for his poured concrete works. He also started burning paintings. Initially, these were black or white monochromes, inspired by Ad Reinhardt, whose work he discovered around this time, but McCarthy quickly began to incorporate mass-media imagery into them. He found an old projector and used it to transfer a wide array of pictures—from dragsters to pinups—onto the surface of the paintings prior to searing sections of them. Though unaware of Yves Klein’s burn paintings,⁹ McCarthy knew the raw, charlike surfaces of Robert Mallary, whose bleak, menacing assemblages of the late 1950s and 1960s were often loaded with found materials and dirt and suggestive of bodily violence and cultural decline. As McCarthy notes, Mallary’s “apocalyptic” art “makes you think of Rauschenberg’s work . . . but this is about decay and rot. Mallary expresses trauma.”¹⁰ Several of McCarthy’s paintings from this period were in the form of triptychs, with pornographic images on the side panels and figures wearing gas masks in the centers.¹¹ The results were irreverent combinations of diverse cultural references—sex, religion, war, pure abstraction—blatantly clumped together and scorched.

He was also drawn to the sensibility of fellow Weber State student Bob Arentz, who described himself as a “concrete poet” and whose idea of art-as-action involved elaborate absurdist tasks. For one piece, he enlisted McCarthy to help him steal all the bedsheets from their dormitory. “At one point,” McCarthy recalls, “I asked him why he was stealing the sheets, and he said, ‘it’s not about stealing the sheets, it’s about hiding them.’” Another time Arentz convinced all the football players to place their penises on sheets of photographic paper and made a book of “football dicks.”¹² His final performance at Weber State consisted of driving a steam shovel onto campus, digging a giant hole with it, driving the machine into the hole, and trying to bury it. Arentz was expelled as a result, but not before his mix of theatricality and twisted humor left a lasting impression on McCarthy.

In 1966, after getting good enough grades at Weber State, McCarthy transferred to the University of Utah, which had a relatively progressive art scene, including a new experimental film program.¹³ While there he was interested in art, film, and music, and he absorbed a diverse array of influences. He continued to produce burn paintings, often encrusting them with oil, dirt, and mass-media ephemera—plastic toys, popular film imagery, advertisements, pornography.¹⁴ He was also interested in fluxus, and particularly the work of Yoko Ono, whose early 60s

“Instructures”—ethereal painting-events based on simple instructions—involved acting upon works of art:

Leave a piece of canvas or finished painting on the floor in the street. (*Painting to be Stepped On*, 1961)

Light canvas or any finished painting with a cigarette at any time for any length of time.

See the smoke movement. The painting ends when the whole canvas is gone. (*Smoke Painting*, 1961)

That same year, McCarthy acquired Allan Kaprow’s catalogue *Assemblage, Environments & Happenings* from a Mormon bookshop, and the book had a profound impact on the young artist’s thinking.¹⁵ In the main essay, Kaprow emphasizes the concepts of impermanence, action, and change in art. In addition to his own performance-based events, he features those of fluxus artist George Brecht, the Gutai group, Tetsumi Kudo, and Wolf Vostell, all of whom McCarthy has cited as important influences.¹⁶ Kaprow praises them for blurring distinctions between art and life, artist and audience, for producing events that integrate “people, space, the environment, time.”¹⁷ McCarthy conceived of his own works in similar terms. “[They] were all about activity and action,” he explains; “they became stages or arenas,” their creation “a type of performance.”¹⁸ He combined this approach with a destructive impulse derived from artists affiliated with the 1966 Destruction in Arts Symposium (DIAS), including Gustav Metzger and Ralph Ortiz. Metzger, for example, made his “acid action paintings” before an audience, spraying acid on stretched sheets of nylon that were quickly consumed by the caustic substance.

McCarthy also moved into performance proper while at Utah. In *Saw/Hammer* (1967), he arranged furniture on a stage to resemble a domestic setting and then, with the help of a friend, demolished everything with hammers and a chainsaw, while a noise band played behind them.¹⁹ This performance generated one of his earliest surviving sculptures, *Mannequin Head and Squirrel* (fig. 1.1), consisting of a mutilated stuffed rodent jammed into the side of a fractured female mannequin head resting atop a tattered cardboard box. At once disturbing and funny, this performance and its relic prefigured McCarthy’s later work and the range of oppositions routinely conflated by it—human and inhuman, violence and humor, reality and artifice. That same year, he planned to bulldoze an entire abandoned house before an audience, but the action was stopped by the city. Other unfulfilled ventures included bringing a dead horse to school and displaying it on a stage with dramatic lighting,²⁰ and a series of “competitive diggings,” in which contestants would dig for days, each trying to make the deepest hole, while spectators watched from surrounding bleachers.²¹ Such projects again evoked the work and ideas of DIAS artists—Ralph Ortiz, whose ax-wielding destructions of household furniture in the early and mid-1960s were conceived as transcendental rituals, as well as Metzger, who similarly theorized “auto-destructive” art as a ritualistic assault on capitalist material culture, imperialism, warfare, and bourgeois social values.²² Yet whereas McCarthy acknowledges thinking of his irreverent and often destructive projects as assaults on the normality of his Salt Lake City background,²³ his dispassionate representation of bodily violence in works like *Mannequin Head and Squirrel* and his dead-horse scheme signaled a general disregard for lofty ideals—as did the sheer inanity of competitive hole-digging. His mix of juvenile humor and callous



II.
Paul McCarthy,
*Mannequin Head and
Squirrel*, 1967.
Courtesy the artist
and Hauser & Wirth.

brutality was at odds with the essential humanism and earnest utopianism of Ortiz's and Metzger's decidedly politicized, anti-authoritarian actions. (McCarthy's crude anti-aesthetic also distinguished his work from Gordon Matta-Clark's more stylized domestic dissections produced a few years later.)

McCarthy's interests remained consistent throughout a peripatetic interval between 1968 and 1970. During a one-year stint at the San Francisco Art Institute, he continued to combine painting, assemblage, and destructive performance. *Silver Painting, Fantasy Island* (1969), for example, is a large framed plywood panel, painted with metallic paint, stained by mud and encrusted with melted plastic-doll flesh. Such work is an outgrowth of his earlier Doyle Strong-inspired constructions and can also be linked to various precedents—Jean Dubuffet's mineral paintings, for instance, or Rauschenberg's dirt and gold paintings. However, as critic Daniel Baird

observes, McCarthy emphatically engaged not just “low” culture but the “dimestore fantasies” trafficked by it. His soiled monochromes evince the twisted performances—the use and abuse of vulgar commodities—that produced them. “In the extant photograph of *Silver Painting, Fantasy Island*,” Baird explains, “McCarthy is hunched over the messy, flooded piece, torching dolls like a sick adolescent.”²⁴

While in San Francisco, McCarthy studied with Irby Walton, who was making ephemeral garbage-junk installations and was interested in the relationship between art and play. He considered Walton’s “low aesthetic” and embrace of corniness and playfulness a refreshing alternative to the more serious work of Metzger and others.²⁵ “It was all very life-affirming, his whole approach,” McCarthy recalls, “and it was in a way very anti-art, to a degree, or anti-convention.”²⁶ Walton also introduced him to Kaprow, who visited one of his classes at the Art Institute.

For the most part, however, McCarthy expected the school to be more progressive and was disappointed with what he saw as a reactionary overemphasis on California expressionism.²⁷ After graduating with a BFA in the spring of 1969, he returned to Utah to deal with the Vietnam draft board. (Refusing induction, he finally received his conscientious objector status in 1972.)²⁸ While back home, he took graduate classes at the University of Utah and formed an artist collective. Initially called Thursday Night Class and later Up-River School, this collective focused on performance and free-form and noise music, and McCarthy experimented with sound collage on a four-inch reel-to-reel tape recorder. He formed a short-lived band with members of the collective: one played an acoustic guitar, another played a toy Woody Woodpecker guitar, and a third held a microphone up to a live rooster perched on his shoulder, while McCarthy played his tapes and four women sat on the floor singing nursery rhymes. The objective was to be decidedly *not* progressive counterculture rock—to be “fucked up . . . nothing normal about any of it,” as he explains.²⁹

“My early performances of the late 1960s came out of an awareness of Yves Klein,” McCarthy has stated—a surprising claim, not just because of the certainty of other influences but because McCarthy knew of only one work by Klein at the time, the 1960 *Leap into the Void*.³⁰ In this famous photograph Klein is shown midair, having apparently launched himself from a second-story window toward an empty street below. In fact, McCarthy had only heard of the image, which he incorrectly assumed was authentic. Yet he was so impressed by the implausibility, drama, and sheer madness of the gesture that he himself leaped in solidarity from a balcony of the University of Utah art building in 1968, prior to leaving for San Francisco. (In typical McCarthy fashion, his feet-first jump was devoid of Klein’s swan-dive elegance.)³¹

Strong connections can indeed be drawn between McCarthy’s early work and Klein’s audacious performative approach, his use of ritual and spectacle, his play with the rational and the irrational, and his part-shaman-part-clown persona, much of which can conceivably be deduced from Klein’s leap—or simply the news of it. It was the physical act itself, however, and the willful abandonment of bodily control represented by it, that can be most securely linked to McCarthy’s late-60s and early-70s activities. First performed in 1968 outside of San Francisco, *Too Steep, Too Fast*, for instance, involved McCarthy running pell-mell down a hill until he lost control and was practically free-falling. The following year, in Salt Lake City, he

performed *Mountain Bowling*, in which he tossed a bowling ball down a steep slope, transforming it into a dangerous projectile. Both works were repeated in various locations—the former between 1968 and 1972, the latter between 1969 and 1970. In *Spinning* (1970), one of his earliest videos, McCarthy spun continuously for the sixty-minute length of the videotape, his hands brushing against the walls with each revolution. These works can all be seen as outgrowths of his mimetic “leap into the void,” yet, in contrast to Klein, McCarthy adds buffoonish humor and physical endurance. Whereas Klein emphasized style, dematerialization, and the metaphysical, McCarthy’s works are decidedly uncouth, bluntly material, and banal. They are also somewhat pathological and compulsive—qualities intensified by the repetitions of *Too Steep*, *Too Fast* and *Mountain Bowling* and by the unimaginable duration of *Spinning*.³²

In other works from this period McCarthy provides vertiginous experiences for the viewer. *Inverted Hallway* and *Inverted Room* (both 1970), for example, are collections of photographs of institutional architectural spaces turned upside down or sideways. Walls become floors; ceiling fixtures become standing lamps; doorways become picture windows. *Fear of Reflections* (1971) is a series of photographs of storefront windows in which reflections from the street cause visual ambiguities. *Fear of Mannequins* (1971; plate 4) combines such ambiguity with the uncanny effects of artificially lit mannequin heads, which appear almost alive in their plate-glass encasements. Devoid of humor, these photographic works were intended as sincere expressions of McCarthy’s nearly overwhelming mistrust of perceptual and psychological reality at this time—a kind of existential crisis that forever affected the artist’s worldview.³³ *Spinning Room* amplifies this uncertainty and extends it into three dimensions. Conceived and diagrammed in 1971 but realized only in 2008, the work is an architectural structure consisting of four large rear-projection screens as walls. In the center of the interior space, a turntable with four video cameras slowly spins, and the live footage is projected onto the screens. Trapped in the vortex of McCarthy’s funhouse, viewers—or, rather, participants—see their own images whirl by, sometimes at a slight delay or upside down or multiplied, and periodically interrupted by flares of bright light when camera and projector momentarily align.

In a series of experimental films made between 1966 and 1971, of which only two survive, McCarthy offers similarly dizzying effects. *Couple* (1966) is a ten-minute black-and-white film in which the camera pans around a room independent of the actions taking place. Viewers catch glimpses of a naked couple doing mundane activities—walking around, watching television, lying in bed. The camera’s focal point is set at two to three feet, causing the figures and their domestic accoutrements to move in and out of focus; only the occasional arbitrary close-up is clear. In *Spinning Camera, Walking, Mike Cram Walking* (1971), the camera revolves around a semi-dark room while McCarthy’s friend (Cram) circumnavigates its perimeter. He is seen only during the fleeting moments when his trajectory and the camera’s coincide.

In addition to the liberating influence of Klein, such works are anchored in the experimental film of the late 1950s and 60s. McCarthy was interested in Andy Warhol’s play with faux realism, as in the campy “western” *Lonesome Cowboys* (1968), which openly satirizes American stereotypes of masculinity. To McCarthy, the film

offered “a radical, subversive alternative to Hollywood. It is a perverse parody. It is a fantasy play. It is obvious they are pretending. They have no interest in convincing the viewer that this all takes place in the 1800s.”³⁴ He also admired the work of Stan VanDerBeek, Stan Brakhage, and Bruce Conner. In dadaist films such as *Science Friction* (1959), VanDerBeek combined crude cut-and-paste animation and eerie noise soundtracks with no coherent narrative. His *Movie Drome* (1963) was a domed structure upon which he projected several of his films at once—an early precedent to McCarthy’s *Spinning Room*.³⁵ Brakhage combined basic narrative with a range of innovative, and often disorienting, techniques. His seminal *Dog Star Man* films (1961–64) are a compilation of such innovations: superimposition and double exposure; scratching, painting, and hole-punching the film itself; and rapid montage of diverse imagery—everything from lush color abstractions to microscopic photography to stock footage. Conner’s films are similarly constructed. *A Movie* (1958) is a sensationalist montage of found clips: pornography; old westerns; car, motorcycle, and minibicycle races; ethnographic footage; plane and boat crashes; surfers wiping out; atomic bomb explosions; a mass grave; a collapsing bridge; an erupting volcano. Set to a stirring soundtrack, the film implies devastation and cultural decline, if not complete mayhem. After seeing all of Conner’s films in a class at the University of Utah, McCarthy produced an exact remake of one short—simply adding “A film by Paul McCarthy” at the end.³⁶ He pointedly exaggerated the core technique of Conner and Brakhage, both of whom freely pirated premade material to exploit the jarring possibilities of basic de- and re-contextualization. Pushing this technique to its limit, McCarthy’s mischievous remake was more blunt, more “dumb”—and more humorous.

McCarthy’s *Couple* and *Spinning Camera*, *Walking*, *Mike Cram Walking* disrupt the typically coherent cinematic experience, foregrounding the filmic medium, its illusionism and its mechanical apparatus.³⁷ Yet their primary effects are visceral, leaving viewers dizzy and disoriented, if not disembodied—sensations pushed to an extreme in *Spinning Room*. As curator Chrissie Iles recently observed, McCarthy’s early films, photographs, performances, and videos challenged accepted notions not only of realism but of reality itself: “At the core of their implications of anxiety and destabilization lies an almost ethical impulse to question everything—to turn it upside down, see it from an opposite angle, release the body from accumulated patterns, perceive with the brain as well as with the eyes, and bring the viewer to a state of not knowing what is the ‘right’ side up. This inversion of logic is a way of opening up our thinking.”³⁸

In 1970 McCarthy moved to Los Angeles with the goal of becoming a filmmaker. He enrolled at the University of Southern California’s interdisciplinary art and film program but was disappointed with the school’s solely narrative-based Hollywood-style approach. He found little support for his body-oriented activities, his desire to upend Hollywood conventions, and his emerging interest in videotape as a medium.³⁹ He was, however, fascinated with Los Angeles itself. To McCarthy, LA’s mix of glamour, counterculture, and percolating violence provided a darker, more unnerving alternative to the peace-and-love hippiedom of San Francisco.⁴⁰ He again came under the influence of Kaprow, whom he met at a USC performance festival, and he began spending time at the recently formed California Institute of the Arts, where Kaprow was teaching at the time.⁴¹ Though he received a master’s

degree from USC in 1973, McCarthy's work is more closely tied to that early-70s Cal Arts scene than to his own formal schooling.⁴²

Crucial to his development was the confluence of conceptualism and performance at Cal Arts, particularly the idea of performance as a method of analysis and communication—or, as McCarthy puts it, “education and reeducation.” In addition to Kaprow's ideas, the activities surrounding the Feminist Art Program were a foundational manifestation of this approach, essential to what was, for McCarthy, a “very influential period” of LA performance-based art.⁴³ Formed by Judy Chicago in 1970 at Fresno State College and relocated to Cal Arts in the fall of 1971, the program pioneered the use of performance as a vehicle for political resistance and critique. FAP artists examined female identity and patriarchal oppression through a mix of explicit bodily imagery, role playing, exaggeration, satiric humor, and flagrant defiance of social norms.⁴⁴ McCarthy was initially brought to Cal Arts by Chicago herself, who invited him to attend some FAP performances after seeing a poster promoting an exhibition of his work.⁴⁵ His subsequent interest in costume and role playing, his play with identity and gender, his use of exaggeration and parody, and—perhaps most important—his broad focus on power structures and social conditioning can be firmly linked to such FAP practices.

In the early to mid-70s, performance and performance-based video increasingly became McCarthy's mediums of choice. He produced a series of seemingly pointless one-act works that built upon his earlier interests in bodily limits, repetition, basic routines, and simple absurdist tasks, and that underscored his penchant for social impropriety and dark humor.⁴⁶ Each consisted of enacting a simple written instruction:⁴⁷

Pound a line of holes in the wall with a solid steel rod. (1970)
Hold an apple in your armpit. (1970)
Invite friends over. Cook them a pot of Vaseline petroleum jelly. (1971)
Comic books displayed on the floor in a single line. (1971)
Cover the walls, windows, doors and woodwork of a room with Vaseline petroleum jelly. Spread it evenly. Spray paint red. (1971)
Give your magazines a shower. (1971)
Use a shovel to throw dirt in the air. (1972)
Pour a bucket of paint down a steep, sloping street gutter. (1972)
Plaster your head and one arm into a wall (1973)

Many of these performances can be understood as outgrowths of Ono's aforementioned “Instructures,” as well as the work of several artists covered in the Kaprow book McCarthy acquired in 1966—Brecht's “Instruction Card” events, Kaprow's “Routine” activities, Vostell's absurdist task-based performances. McCarthy's actions especially evoke Vostell's 1961 *Citirama I*, a set of self-imposed directives reproduced in Kaprow's catalogue, including the following:

Urinate in the bomb rubble and think of your best friends.
Go into this poor house and watch the games of the children—then put a fresh fish in your mouth and go for a stroll.⁴⁸

McCarthy's instructions additionally recall the work of Bruce Nauman and Vito Acconci, with which he was also familiar.⁴⁹ Both artists melded conceptualism and performance art, and each used repetition and physical endurance to explore, and

often dislocate, the mechanics of the body and its boundaries. In a series of late-60s videos such as *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner around the Perimeter of a Square* (1967–68), Nauman carries out rudimentary but utterly irrational routines, usually for improbably long durations. Often involving inverted or oblique camera angles, these videos also relate to McCarthy's interest in perceptual disorientation. Acconci's late-60s and early-70s work likewise entailed the carrying out of simple tasks, but whereas Nauman's actions were generally monotonous and absurdist, Acconci's were increasingly confrontational and self-aggressive: in *Soap & Eyes* (1970) he doused his eyes in soap; in *Trademarks* (1970) he bit all the parts of his body he could reach with his mouth; in *Conversions: Part I (Light, Reflection, Self-Control)* (1971) he burned the hair off his chest with a candle.

McCarthy's performances from the early to mid-1970s clearly relate to the routinized work of these artists—not to mention the instruction-based work of conceptualists such as Lawrence Weiner and Sol LeWitt. However, an act like *Plaster your head and one arm into a wall* (fig. 1.2) was distinct in tone and sensibility. McCarthy's performances were decidedly anti-intellectual, seemingly haphazard, boorish, and even insane. Only Vostell and Acconci can be said to have prefigured their pathologic nature, and yet McCarthy attained a heightened degree of inanity and meaninglessness. His blatant idiocy soiled the philosophical integrity of many of his predecessors, who even when embracing the irrational were engaged in profound ethical—if not metaphysical—undertakings, “a finding of truth,” as Kaprow put it.⁵⁰ Indeed, some of McCarthy's performances from this period can be said to caricature that pervasive performance-as-truth-seeking agenda.

Other works offer more pronounced caricatures of contemporary art movements. Several video performances, for example, feature McCarthy using his own body as a paintbrush. In *Face Painting—Floor, White Line* (1972), he lies prone on the floor and, while slowly shimmying his body forward, pours a can of white house paint above his head and drags his face through it to make a line. In *Face, Head, Shoulder Painting—Wall Black Line* (1972), he uses a similar technique to paint a sloppy stripe across the wall. Despite the ridiculousness of these works, they cut to the very core of performance art itself, which by some accounts is rooted in the bodily gestures of abstract expressionist action painting. If Kaprow famously extended “the legacy of Jackson Pollock” to its logical next step—off the canvas and into real life—McCarthy here acts like a dope who grossly misinterprets that lesson.⁵¹ As in his ham-fisted Conner parody, he stretches the innovative method to its breaking point by overliteralizing it.

McCarthy also took on minimalism, whose phenomenological qualities—its “theatricality,” as Michael Fried famously termed it—have similarly been understood as progenitors of performance art.⁵² His 1968 sculpture *Dead H* is a six-foot-long horizontal construction fashioned from steel furnace ducts. The work is a “primary structure” designed to evoke a range of nonformalist associations—not only the letter *H* but the dead human body, as well as corporate hallways, rooms, and ventilation systems.⁵³ As Lane Relyea explains: “Ambiguously situated between modernism identification and minimalist indifference, *Dead H* can be said to pervert both.”⁵⁴ In several of his early-70s actions, McCarthy again used geometric composition as a pointed allusion to minimalist form. Along with the aforementioned “Comic books displayed on the floor in a single line,” another 1971 instruc-



12.

Paul McCarthy, *Plaster your head and one arm into a wall*, 1971. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth.

tion reads “Buy a minimum of ten new packaged dress shirts. Display the shirts on the floor.” A year earlier, he and Mike Cram squished a pool of ketchup between sheets of glass to make *Ketchup Sandwich*. In all of these works, mass-produced commodities and popular culture references were meant to pollute the supposedly pure, abstract minimalist aesthetic: “Instead of copper or metal square plates, it was ketchup, glass, magazines and shirts. On the floor, structure and materials become pop display and commodity, lining up commodity. It was a play on mini-

malism, minimalism and commodity, minimalism and pop. . . . I was making car crashes. It was a mix of influences and institutions or practice.”⁵⁵

The 1971 video *Ma Bell* foretold a new direction, one that, along with the conscious melding of distinct cultural categories—his “car crash” methodology—would characterize McCarthy’s performance-based work from the mid-1970s on. For *Ma Bell*, he sat in his studio on the top floor of a former military induction center overlooking the city of Los Angeles. While cackling maniacally, the artist opens a phone book, pours motor oil from a large metal drum on one of its pages, adds a mound of cotton, sprinkles some flour on top, and turns the page. He repeats this process over and over, pounding each page closed with increasing ferocity. The camera shows only McCarthy’s hands and the repulsive oozing blob on which he methodically works. Like his other lunatic performances at this time, *Ma Bell* essentially involved the ritualistic execution of deranged instructions; “it was,” McCarthy explains, “almost as if I was mixing a recipe: flour, or food, oil—like a cake or something.” In fact, the work overlaps two distinct organizational systems, the alphabetically listed phone book and the step-by-step food recipe.

What made it especially significant, however, was that, as McCarthy explains, “it was the first piece I did as a sort of persona, as a sort of character. I imagined myself as a kind of hysterical person.”⁵⁶ With the adoption of this persona McCarthy began to further distinguish himself from Nauman, Acconci, Vostell, Ono, Brecht, and Kaprow, as well as from his own contemporaries such as fellow LA-based artist Chris Burden. He moved away from “performance as a concrete reality, where you don’t *represent* getting shot, you actually *get* shot,” as McCarthy puts it, and toward self-conscious artifice, toward “mimicry, appropriation, fiction, representation and questioning meaning.”⁵⁷ (His “action painting” works from 1972, in which the artist acts like a dense misinterpreter of Pollock/Kaprow, can be seen as an immediate upshot of this shift.) *Ma Bell* is closely aligned with the role-playing approach of the Feminist Art Program, but it is dark and demented, and seemingly devoid of any explicit political message.

Building upon this approach, McCarthy’s mid-70s work grew more elaborate, intense, and dramatic. It also moved decidedly into the sociopolitical realm. Role playing enabled this transition, eliding any sense of personal expression or revelation in the work. Through a cast of insane character types, McCarthy began to actively destabilize meanings in ways that highlighted their culturally constructed essence. Pop references also grew more central as signifiers of American consumerism and its concomitant social values. McCarthy’s work turned more confrontational and challenging as he began exploring the ways in which norms and ideals are instilled by institutions and reinforced through everyday behavior, cultural context, and behavioral standards. As curator Dan Cameron has noted, starting 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.”⁵⁸ Aware of the obvious artificiality of everything yet still viscerally repulsed, conscious of some underlying significance but utterly confused, viewers are pressed to reflect upon the entrenched values that determine why they react the way they do—the standards of decorum that sustain not only the art world but civilization at large.

This shift in McCarthy’s approach was rooted in his growing mistrust of real-

ity and his conclusion that much of what we experience is socially conditioned, which led him to reconsider art's essential function. "I didn't know whether there was help for the world," he recalls, "and I didn't think I could find any kind of truth. . . . We only know what we're conditioned to."⁵⁹ McCarthy's sense of disillusionment was exacerbated by his interest in the writings of theorists such as Wilhelm Reich and Norman O. Brown—for whom the culturally imposed repression of bodily urges result in a host of personal and societal ills—and especially the work of psychiatrist R. D. Laing.⁶⁰ Laing sought to demystify everyday life, arguing that modern people are coerced by social institutions—particularly the family unit—into a state of subjugation, mass conformity, and alienation, maintained by oppressive, psychologically destructive rules of propriety. Normalcy is thus a condition "of being out of one's mind," and reality is no more than a convergence of "socially shared hallucinations." "Our collusive madness," Laing concludes, "is what we call sanity."⁶¹ Laing's ideas fueled McCarthy's move into work that not only disrupts norms and ideals but locates social institutions as the source of those norms and ideals. Such disruption becomes, for McCarthy, a way of asserting "that there isn't a conclusive resolution or a conclusive reality," of articulating the artificiality of existence itself.⁶²

McCarthy's 1974 performance *Hot Dog* (plate 5) was an intimate affair enacted before a small group of friends in the basement of an old building. The artist invited only as many people as could fit at a couple of small round tables, positioned next to his own table and set with plates of hot dogs, as if in a restaurant.⁶³ His opening routines, done without acknowledging his guests, served to assert the privacy of his performance and its locale, leaving the audience in the awkward position of having gathered to watch a character consumed by his own personal habits. McCarthy put his visitors' most fundamental standards of individual and social propriety to the test. Artist Barbara Smith later recalled what transpired:

He removes all but his shorts and shaves his entire body except for his head. The blade becomes clogged and he scrapes his fragile skin repeatedly and rapidly. Very shortly he is completely shaven; his body bleeds here and there from the nicks of the blade. He pours rubbing alcohol on his pasty white skin. We are agog with a wincing, dumb pain. He stuffs his penis into a hot dog bun and tapes it on, then smears his ass with mustard. His shorts are down around his knees. He approaches the tables and sits nearby, drinking ketchup and stuffing his mouth with hot dogs, more and more until it seems inconceivable that any more will fit. Binding his head with gauze and adding more hot dogs, he finally tapes his bulging mouth closed so that the protruding mouth looks like a snout. I struggle inwardly to control the impulse to gag. He stands alone struggling with himself, trying to prevent his own retching. It is apparent that he is about to vomit. I look around desperately to see if I would ruin the performance and our own sense of stamina by simply leaving. Should he vomit he might choke to death, since the vomit would have no place to go. And should any one of us vomit, we might trigger him to do likewise. The terrible moment passes, and the piece continues. I don't seem to recall how it ended, but this discomfort that we all felt is the essential audience response to McCarthy's work.⁶⁴

McCarthy's actions were uncategorizable and uniquely difficult to stomach, even within a mid-70s art scene teeming with provocative work. (Smith's own contemporaneous performances, including *Mass Meal* [1969], *Celebration of the Holy Squash* [1971], and *Feed Me* [1973], regularly involved both nudity and food.) In a 1980 survey

of 1970s performance art in California, Linda Frye Burnham noted the abundance of frank sexuality, violence, death, cruelty, repulsion, masochism, masturbation, feces, and dead fetuses—yet she singled out McCarthy’s misuse of condiments and meat as being “impossible for many performance audiences to watch.”⁶⁵ By the middle of the decade, Burden’s shocking self-mutilations had become performance art classics, but McCarthy’s unrestrained gluttony was still too much for many viewers to take. As Smith implies, audiences simply did not know how to respond.

Like his earlier instruction-based works, the disturbing effects of *Hot Dog* were amplified by the sense that McCarthy was performing a premeditated, though pathological, personal routine. As disturbing as his behavior was, it seemed deliberate and methodical—as if he were following not a manic impulse but some weird logic, a social order divorced from Western bodily norms. The intimate, restaurantlike setting enhanced the work’s core contradiction: on the one hand, McCarthy’s guests experienced genuine visceral disgust up close; on the other, the entire situation was framed as fictitious, as though audience and artist were in some sort of bizarre play—or alternative universe—together. The work essentially collapsed distinctions between reality and artifice: the self-abuse was both absurd and dangerous, dramatized and concrete; the blood was both convincing and obviously fake (i.e., ketchup); materials were both tasty and repulsive; viewers were both witnesses and accessories.

In subsequent performances McCarthy amplified this tension between reality and artifice, underscoring the constructed nature of his personas and disrupting the art-viewing experience itself. Masks, makeup, and costume began to play greater roles, various mediating devices were used, and at times the artist took it upon himself to interfere with his audience. Meaning also grew increasingly slippery. In the twin 1975 performances *Sailor’s Meat* (fig. 1.3) and *Tubbing* (plate 6), McCarthy dressed in a blond wig, bright blue eye shadow, and lingerie and enacted a series of lewd atrocities with various squishy substances—condiments, beauty cream, raw meat. The sense of pure revulsion was, however, dampened by the chosen space and the use of video. As McCarthy explains:

Sailor’s Meat and *Tubbing* were filmed in a bathroom and a bedroom in a hotel. There was a hallway between the two rooms, and there was a monitor placed in the hallway. It blocked the audience from looking into the room. The cameraman stood in the doorway; the audience could watch the action only on the monitor. When the *Tubbing* performance in the bathroom was over, I walked from the bathroom to the bedroom to start *Sailor’s Meat*, it was the only time the audience saw me physically. There were several pieces that were about the image on the monitor and its relationship to the actual performer, and architecture, or the performance being videotaped in one room and the monitor with the image in the second room.⁶⁶

In *Deadening* (1979) McCarthy wore a stocking over his head and a floral dress. The entire performance simply consisted of the artist distracting the audience from watching video footage of another work, *Contemporary Cure All*, made early that year. He covered viewers’ faces with his hands, blocked their view with his body, and insisted that they close their eyes and go to sleep. For his 1981 performance *Death Ship*, viewers were made to wear sailor’s hats, and subsequent works have required audiences to wear full-body costumes.⁶⁷ Such participation inhibits one’s ability to safely and unselfconsciously observe the artist’s outrageous be-



havior. To McCarthy, this interference further ruptured not only the art experience but socialized experience as a whole—an assertion of his view that “there isn’t a conclusive resolution or a conclusive reality.”⁶⁸

McCarthy’s combination of repulsiveness, inanity, and rupture also strained the accepted wisdom that artists produce enlightening works of art by ignoring limits or breaking rules. His works violated a plethora of social and cultural norms, and yet they seemed devoid of any progressive content, ideology, or personal revelation. Indeed, they all actively preempted such communication. Like Kelley’s later *Pay for Your Pleasure* installation, McCarthy’s performances shifted attention to the question of artistic transgression itself, to the myth of the artist-transgressor, the special conditions and spaces that allow for his or her violations, and the viability of such violations as progressive politics.

The 1976 performance *Political Disturbance* (plate 7) targeted the histrionics of political activism itself, and particularly activist art. Here McCarthy enacted a communication malfunction, seeking not to raise consciousness but to muddle it. He had been slated to do a performance on the roof of the Biltmore Hotel in Los Angeles, as part of the American Theater Association Convention being held there. At the last minute, and without permission, McCarthy changed the location of his work to the hotel’s stairwell. Wearing his high school graduation suit and a rubber Yasser Arafat mask, and surrounded by ketchup-covered crucifixes and baby dolls hung from the railings, he sprawled out on the stairs. As a crowd of guests gathered and hotel managers threatened to call the police, McCarthy slathered himself in ketchup, ate raw hamburger meat, sang, danced, and groaned, while Arabic music blared from a

13.

Paul McCarthy, *Sailor’s Meat*, 1975. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth.

loudspeaker. He also arranged to have his activities broadcast into each room on the hotel's closed-circuit TV channel. The work made obvious reference to highly politicized issues—namely, the Arab oil crisis and the then-recent bout of PLO terrorist acts, some of which took place in hotels.⁶⁹ Yet without any discernible point, McCarthy's behavior was impossible to categorize—arguably the work's greatest offense. He described the audience's 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."⁷⁰

Los Angeles had recently been a breeding ground for activist art, a reflection of the city's role as a center of counterculture activity. The LA-based Artists' Protest Committee organized several public interventions in the mid-1960s, most notably the 1966 Artists' *Tower of Peace*, a temporary steel structure surrounded by 418 two-foot-square works, each by a different artist.⁷¹ Representing diverse styles, movements, and generations, these artists came together for a communal cause, and their antiwar gesture was earnest, coherent, and unambiguous. Yet there was never any consensus about the value of such an intervention, either as art or as politics, and almost immediately after, some began to question such an approach. In a 1967 radio interview, for example, Ad Reinhardt—whose contribution to the tower consisted of the words "NO WAR" on a blue background—claimed that artists cannot really be political "without being almost fraudulent or self-mocking about what they're doing." He continued:

There are no good images or good ideas that one can make. There are no effective paintings or objects that one can make against the war. There's been a complete exhaustion of images. A broken doll with red paint poured over it or a piece of barbed wire may seem to be a symbol or something like that, but that's not the realm of the fine artist anyway.⁷²

Political Disturbance was similarly skeptical about the "new politicization" of art, to use Lucy Lippard's term from just a few years prior.⁷³ As the work's pointedly generic title alleges, McCarthy's performance was apparently "political" and clearly a "disturbance" of some sort, yet it was intended to stupefy rather than speak out. Its numerous allusions to hot-button issues—not only the oil crisis and terrorism but war and religion more generally—are undeniable, but they refuse to congeal into even the semblance of a coherent message. The work's wanton mix of self-mockery, charged iconography, and provocative behavior was consistent with Reinhardt's pronouncement, which, incidentally, might be construed to shed light on McCarthy's repeated use of ketchup-covered dolls in the 1970s. *Political Disturbance* was a farce, an affront to the sincere artist-activist and to political art in general. It was also distinct from other absurdist interventions such as those popularized in the 1960s by Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters, a collective that evolved out of the West Coast beat scene and whose spectacles featured mass drug use, rock and roll, trippy lighting effects, and freeform dance. Though no less Dionysian, McCarthy's public outburst was wholly devoid of the Pranksters' peace-and-love, psychedelic tune-in-turn-on-drop-out sensibility. Staged within an upscale Los Angeles hotel before mortified bourgeois guests, it revealed the fact that despite the upheavals of the previous decade, certain social norms still reigned over art.

Confusion was the typical reaction to most of McCarthy's work at this time, as viewers did not know what to make of his blatant transgressions. Barbara Smith recollected the audience response to a similar performance, titled *Class Fool*, also from 1976:

Some roll their eyes to the side as they share their revulsion with each other. They make mock appeal for release with a slight edge of humor present only because their discomfort will not last forever. Mouths are set tight and foreheads are furrowed with eyes often downcast. . . . Some appear ashen. A few leave. Others follow. One by one the room vacates until only five or six remain. No one is able to resist the extreme discomfort his piece provokes. . . . It is your experience of the art itself which he asks you to examine for yourself.⁷⁴

The Los Angeles performance art scene at this moment was, to a certain degree, divided between idealistic holdouts and the freshly disenchanted—a reflection of the greater post-60s sociopolitical moment. Along with McCarthy, the embittered position was represented by the equally ribald Kipper Kids, a duo that staged several performances in Los Angeles around this time. They too enacted hilariously disgusting rituals—based on birthday parties, ceremonial meals, or other routinized events—that often involved food products, costumes, and wanton self-abuse. In a 1975 article, critic Peter Clothier recounted an unexpected incident that occurred at a then-recent Kipper Kids performance at the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art. The performance—which Clothier described as “gross, obscene, irreverent and unbeautiful . . . a deliberate and unremitting distortion of the niceties of our social behavior, our beliefs, our intimacies and our art”—was interrupted by two “counter-performers” dressed in robes of classical antiquity. In opposition to the Kipper Kids’ dark, confrontational exercises in disillusionment and demythologization, these intruders attempted to reassert beauty, innocence, and “the power of Love” by embracing, kissing, and fondling each other. The Kipper Kids responded violently, hitting them and roughly tossing them off the stage, bloodying one of their ears. To Clothier, this confrontation was paradigmatic of then-current ideological divisions between those who equate performance with reality, poetry with prose, art with life, and those who attempt to dislodge daily rituals via blatant artifice; between those who worship beauty and those who reveled in acerbic anti-aesthetics, in disorder and meaninglessness; and, more profoundly, between those who advance utopian promises of enlightenment and those who regard reason and idealistic belief as socially constructed deceptions.⁷⁵ The Kipper Kids, Clothier concludes, evoke “all those realms where clown is king”; they belong to an alternative tradition that includes Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, and Jean Genet, the bawdy vulgarities of Shakespeare, the music hall, the Goon Show, and the rock concert:

They slap us physically, at times, with buckets of flour and water, remnants of half-chewed food. But also morally and spiritually, with their painful rituals, their birthdays, their tea ceremonies. . . . We are made to suffer their abuses and we suffer as best we know how—with laughter. They act out our nightmares for us, create a world in which all logic and order, everything we use to establish the illusion that life is meaningful and purposeful, is thrown to the winds. . . . The last barriers which we use to protect ourselves from our greedy, cannibalistic, savage and acquisitive nature are torn down.⁷⁶

McCarthy's approach is markedly darker, less slapsticky, and more truly

grotesque than the Kipper Kids' infantile outbursts, but he certainly shares their buffoonish sensibility, the idea of "the clown as cultural critic," as he himself has put it.⁷⁷ Indeed, he remembers being interested in the American Indian idea of the "sacred clown" at this time.⁷⁸ He was also inspired by Lenny Bruce—the comedian's open violation of taboos and especially his obsession with his own 1964 obscenity trial. As McCarthy recalls, "[Bruce] would read the transcript of his trial as a standup comic. He criticized the American court system. His cultural criticism and language became his work."⁷⁹ Not unlike McCarthy's own re- and de-contextualizations of common substances and behaviors, Bruce's rereading of dry legalese represented a type of critique from within. Rather than taking a polemical position, Bruce simply overlapped two mutually exclusive spaces and categories of language: the trial transcript and the standup routine. The result was a comedy of dislocated conventions, through which the supposedly neutral becomes charged and the normal becomes twisted, mad, funny.

Enacting similar dislocations, McCarthy's personas are routinely described as insane, perverted, even autistic—all labels for those who not only break social rules but operate according to different sets of rules, different systems, and thus relativize normalcy itself.⁸⁰ "I'm proposing that reality itself can fluctuate," McCarthy explains. "The bottle of mayonnaise within the action is no longer a bottle of mayonnaise; it is now a woman's genitals. Or it is now a phallus."⁸¹ According to Ralph Rugoff, McCarthy's metaphor mixing and semiotic overlapping are what distinguishes his work from most straightforwardly "critical" art: "McCarthy's art works from inside the structures it critiques. . . . It is a choice motivated by the artist's desire not to reproduce the very logical systems he so deeply distrusts, or the bad faith of our precious 'objectivity.'" He not only breaks taboos but "shuffle[s] cultural reference points with a disconcerting disregard for the categories and distinctions that underlie our everyday notions of order."⁸² Rugoff's description is virtually a definition of the grotesque.

McCarthy's tactics can also be linked to the mid-1970s music scene with which he was involved. As mentioned, his interest in the avant-garde work of John Cage and Karlheinz Stockhausen goes back to high school, and he himself periodically experimented with noise music and sound collage. He was also a fan of the more popular antirock of The Fugs and Frank Zappa and his band The Mothers of Invention.⁸³ McCarthy's Los Angeles community fostered a migration between art and music at the time, and he not only participated in that crossbreeding but facilitated it. From 1976 to 1979, he coproduced and cohosted a radio program called *CLOSE Radio* with fellow multimedia artists Nancy Buchanan and John Duncan. Airing on KPFK, Los Angeles, the weekly program was an important arena for audio work that dissolved distinctions between art forms. In 1980 he coorganized the Public Spirit performance-art festival, which similarly featured both artists and musicians. (Mike Kelley performed at the festival.)⁸⁴ In her *Performance Anthology*, Linda Frye Burnham recognized the interconnectedness of the LA music and art scenes. "Many of the local punk bands, springing up nightly by the dozen, are made up of visual artists," she explained, and "the less formal LA artspace will often feature new wave bands between exhibitions."⁸⁵ More recently, in an interview with Kelley, LA-based author Dennis Cooper echoes Burnham's observations, explaining that the city was home to "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 music.”⁸⁶

McCarthy was also involved with the Los Angeles Free Music Society, a collective of fringe noise bands with whom he has performed and recorded throughout his career. The LAFMS was formed in the mid-1970s by artist-musicians Joe Potts, Fredrik Nilsen, and Tom Recchion, and included groups such as Smegma, Le Forte Four, the Doo-Dooettes, and Airway. Stylistically eclectic, these bands were alike in their embrace of electronic distortion, black humor, improvisation, and absurdity.⁸⁷ Members played plastic toys, modified (or broken) instruments, household appliances, and garden tools, and recorded on cheap equipment.⁸⁸ Le Forte Four, for example, featured Potts on his “chopped optigan”—a customized version of a toy synthesizer manufactured by the Mattel Company between 1970 and 1973. The LAFMS shared many members with the 1970s Southern California performance art scene, often holding fluxus-style concerts and happenings.⁸⁹ They also produced some of their earliest recordings during late-night sessions in the electronic composition studios at Cal Arts.⁹⁰

Though their work was diverse, LAFMS musicians demonstrated comparable approaches toward music and culture at large. Their essential strategy was to dislocate conventions via the recontextualization and transmutation of pre-existing musical form. As with Brakhage’s and Conner’s approaches to film, these bands conceived of music as “material” in and of itself.⁹¹ As Le Forte Four member Rick Potts explains: “Most of us were influenced by the idea of the non-musician as someone, or anyone, who creatively works with sound as the medium. . . . A sense of humor was encouraged but not essential. Manipulating a sound source replaced playing a musical instrument. We called it ‘noise’ to distance it from musical expectations.”⁹² Exchanging traditional recording methods for protosampling techniques such as tape splicing, fragmentation, and looping, LAFMS bands composed hodgepodes of imitation pop-music styles, instrument malfunctions, extreme time changes, feedback, noise, arbitrary dialogue, ambient sounds, and recycled bits and pieces of prerecorded songs. “To LAFMS members,” music critic Chris Heenan explains, “recordings are not seen as monoliths to stand back from and worship, but as tools in the world,” and their dissonant and deranged montages served as both inventive form and a kind of musical critique.⁹³

The development of this method in the early and mid-70s was a direct response to the state of popular music at the time, and particularly its politicization. Rock and roll not only had provided the soundtrack to a disgruntled 60s generation faced with increasing instability and strife, but was itself cast as a viable instrument of political and social change, the primary counterculture motivator and unifier.⁹⁴ More than any other medium, rock became the common dialect of personal and public protest—earnest and authentic, an integral component of the larger youth movement. Eschewing this romanticized notion of popular music without explicitly condemning it, the LAFMS offered insincerity, cacophonous sound, burlesque clowning, and outright stupidity as correctives to the perceived pomposity of 60s rock. The result was a refreshing type of experimental music, distinct from both mainstream trends and the ambitions of avant-garde musicians who, despite their unorthodoxy, were situated firmly within the higher-brow realm of jazz or classical music. Decidedly lowbrow, LAFMS bands refused to see anything as

sacrosanct, adopting a self-conscious approach that operated from within rock and roll itself. Edwin Pouncey situates their music-as-material tactics within the “lean years” of American popular music, “which was still suffering from the aftershock of Altamont, Manson and the death of the Love Generation.”⁹⁵ This aftershock was especially profound in California, the onetime counterculture hotbed whose airwaves were now, as Pouncey recalls, “spewing forth commercial rock and disco.”⁹⁶ The LAFMS was a hostile group response—an attack on both 60s music and its 70s backlash—“political” in its refutation of both rock progressivism and the retreat from it. It was also an assault on “rational” life. Members saw their work as a form of sonic surrealism—not dreamlike but jarring and confrontational, a way to unhinge the mind and resist its overreliance on reason and logic, “a safe place,” as Rick Potts puts it, “to be insane or rather speak in tongues and play free.”⁹⁷

McCarthy’s studio, in which he staged *Hot Dog* and various other works, was in the basement of a building that also housed Poo-Bah Record Shop, where Fredrik Nilsen and Tom Recchion worked and several LAFMS musicians would gather in the evenings to perform. McCarthy became close friends with several of these musicians, and he attended many of their performances, which rekindled his interest in experimental music.⁹⁸ He also occasionally collaborated with them. In 1978, for example, he recorded songs as part of C.V. Massage, an LAFMS band made up of McCarthy, Nilsen, Recchion, and John Duncan.⁹⁹ A somewhat different incarnation of that band played at the Public Spirit festival that McCarthy coorganized a few years later. That roster included John Duncan playing Sparklett’s water-cooler bottles, a jackhammer, and what appeared to be a bazooka shell casing; Michael le Donne-Bhennet playing tape recordings; and McCarthy on vocals. In a review of the performance, Linda Frye Burnham describes their music as “about sound, as such, pitched to its loudest and most dissonant level, and the response of the audience to those sounds.” McCarthy’s vocal technique involved groaning, screaming, and shoving his fingers down his throat, resulting in what Burnham refers to as “a sound somewhere between animal strangulation and sado-masochistic orgasm in staccato. It blended nicely with the jackhammer.”¹⁰⁰ Such work fit within the LAFMS’s impudent deconstruction of musical convention via a music-as-material approach.

It was during his initial contact with the LAFMS that McCarthy’s core visual art tactics crystallized. *Political Disturbance* is especially important, for it evoked the artist’s underlying dissatisfaction with the then-prevalent forms of political art—whether visual or aural. With this work, and in performances such as *Hot Dog*, McCarthy produced what Rugoff calls a “semantic disarray,” recontextualizing everyday materials—foods, toys, and other consumer products—in order to upend basic categories and standards.¹⁰¹ Like his LAFMS cohorts, McCarthy turned to buffoonery, crudity, weirdness, and extreme distaste as alternatives to the tactics of his peers and predecessors. The distinctly amateurish qualities of his work at this time were analogous to those of the LAFMS bands he knew and with whom he collaborated.¹⁰² Though planned out in advance, McCarthy’s performances were meant to appear unscripted and crackbrained, and his videos combine this anti-aesthetic with cheap, B-movie production values and ersatz styling. For both McCarthy and the LAFMS, sloppiness and technical incompetence negated any hint of self-seriousness, even as these artists staged rather cerebral examinations of form

and content. Both thwarted artistic pretensions without sacrificing the ability to critique. In fact, their conspicuous ineptitude only enhanced that ability.

The end of the 1970s was, for McCarthy, “the end of performance art.” To him, the theatrical aspect of performance—which he himself always held in suspension with its more concrete flipside—began to dominate. What he saw as an emerging cabaretlike style seemed anathema to his own interest in rupture, dislocation, and disorientation. “They went from white boxes, or trash boxes to black boxes with stages and theater lights,” he explains. “I was not interested in performance theater.”¹⁰³ In 1984 he stopped performing before live audiences, turning instead to video, installation, and sculpture. His essential characteristics and tactics have, however, remained consistent—his focus on rituals and daily routines, on the tensions between reality and artifice, and on the body as a metaphor for social systems, rules, and norms; his use of buffoonery, black humor, and a cast of pointedly blockheaded character types. In a 2007 interview, McCarthy linked his dark clown personas to a memory from his youth:

On Halloween, as a kid, the only costume I remember wearing was a clown costume. Yellow on one side and green on the other with red pompoms down the front and a pointed hat. I remember wearing the costume as a friend told a joke I began to laugh, peeing in the suit and the pee ran down my leg. I am now remaking the clown suit for others to wear, there will be instructions for people to take a pee in the clown suit. It is only complete if you peed in your suit!¹⁰⁴

Whether or not McCarthy ever actually constructed this suit, he has consistently pursued the goal of making people not only laugh and squirm but piss themselves.

MIKE KELLEY: A HISTORY OF CIVILIZATION

Born in 1954, Mike Kelley had a Roman Catholic upbringing in Wayne, Michigan, a blue-collar suburb of Detroit. His family was generally antagonistic to “fine art,” and the little early exposure he had to art of any kind came in the form of hand-crafts of a type of progressive Christian modernism—a melding of Catholic values, social consciousness, and constructivist design that was popularized in the late 1960s by Sister Mary Corita Kent. Kelley explains:

I went to Catholic elementary school; there were no art classes as I recall. But one nun who, obviously, had been influenced by Corita Kent had us make modernist collages. She would bring stacks of popular newsmagazines like *Life* and *Time*, and boxes of raw materials like paper and cloth scraps, to class. Her focus was on social commentary. So I remember making collages with pictures of starving babies positioned between variously colored pieces of burlap.¹

His next-door neighbor worked in a similar vein, producing “cubistic religious scenes” from craft materials and Cézanne-inspired forms, and he admired her as the first genuine artist he knew.

Kelley transferred to public school for junior high, and it was there that he got involved in more impudent activities that better reflected his early-adolescent sensibility: “A group of friends and I drew parodies of superhero comics. We spent a lot of time on this and produced hundreds of issues. They were very irreverent and purposefully silly. The characters were personifications of common and grotesque objects: Captain Spit, Super Spore, Mighty Mold, Palmolive Soap Man, Space Pig and Space Pig Jr., et cetera. The stories made no sense. That was where my head was at when I was a boy—not pictures of starving babies.”² These parodies were directly influenced by *Zap Comix*, and especially the work of Robert Crumb, whom Kelley idolized at the time. He was also a fan of “hot rod” monster cartoonists Ed “Big Daddy” Roth and Detroit’s Stanley “Mouse” Miller, as well as *Mad Magazine*’s Basil Wolverton. Kelley credits these artists with providing his earliest awareness of art’s “radical” potential—that it could be subversive in both form and content.³ *Zap*’s countercultural associations also inspired an interest in psychedelic art, particularly the work of local artist Gary Grimshaw, whose iconic rock concert posters helped shape the image of Detroit’s historic Grande Ballroom in the 1960s.⁴

Kelley had his first encounters with canonical modernism and some basic avant-garde techniques in junior high school as well. Two art teachers made a distinct impression on him: one did Joseph Cornell-like assemblages and paid

Kelley to collect materials for his projects; the other was a “tinkerer” who made light boxes and optical machines and encouraged students to experiment with new forms and mediums.⁵ A bookworm, Kelley also spent a lot of time in the library looking up art that seemed interesting—or “trippy”—including the work of Salvador Dalí and the abstract expressionists. He read Lucy Lippard’s 1971 anthology *Dadas on Art* and amassed an archive of art-related images and stories torn from common magazines that he collected while working at a makeshift community recycling center initiated by him and a few “eco-freak” friends.⁶ Though too young to be familiar with Detroit’s emerging “Cass Corridor” scene, he did occasionally visit the Detroit Institute of Arts at a time when contemporary art curator Samuel J. Wagstaff Jr., was staging a series of influential exhibitions and bolstering the museum’s contemporary collection.⁷ Kelley recalls seeing pop art, minimalism, and the work of Mark di Suvero and Robert Morris, and being amazed by DIA’s permanent collection of modernism, nineteenth-century American painting, and the famous Diego Rivera murals—“mind-blowing” experiences, as he puts it. In high school he began to incorporate some of these sources into his own practice, which largely involved semiabstract painting in the manner of Willem de Kooning, Francis Bacon, and the like.⁸

Kelley saw the formal disjointedness of his work, and that of the artists he admired, in distinctly leftist terms—as a “politic of fracture.” This politic can be linked to his Corita Kent-inspired roots, yet for Kelley it was more directly aligned with the counterculture groups that he idealized in the late 1960s and early 1970s—the Youth International Party or Yippies, the Symbionese Liberation Army, the Weather Underground, and even the Manson Family.⁹ John Sinclair was a major presence in Detroit at this time, and Kelley was an avid reader of his writings and enthusiast of the White Panther Party, formed by Sinclair in 1968. Kelley was especially drawn to the party’s radical street theater, intended, as he recalls, “to render oneself unfit to function in normal society, and thus to prevent oneself from participating in and prolonging it.”¹⁰ Most of all, he was a fan of the MC5, billed as the official “White Panther Band” and managed by Sinclair, who crafted the group’s militant flair.¹¹ (Many of Gary Grimshaw’s most famous designs appeared on the band’s concert posters.) Insisting that “music is one of the most vital revolutionary forces in the West,” Sinclair prophesied a utopian future instigated by a rock-and-roll “guitar army.”¹²

Whereas the MC5’s disruptive antics occasionally irritated the record industry, the music club scene, and at times even the police, some critics were dubious of their “revolutionary” rhetoric, casting them as a simple rehashing of old-fashioned rock-and-roll histrionics.¹³ Kelley liked the music and was initially taken with the band’s mix of intense noise and politics, but its self-professed radicalism soon seemed out of sync with emerging conditions in the Detroit area. The city was hardly a center of counterculture in the early 1970s. Utopian edifices crumbled quickly there as idealism collided head-on with the bitter realities of deteriorating race relations, riots, and a decline in auto-industry prosperity, and Kelley came of age just as the ensuing disenchantment was surfacing.¹⁴ What remained for his own in-between generation, as he describes it, “was only isolation, and a sense of being betrayed.”¹⁵ He recalls: “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.”¹⁶

This jaded perspective carried over to the campus of the University of Michigan, where Kelley attended undergraduate art school from 1972 to 1976. He was struck by the apparent blandness of Ann Arbor, which seemed to have gone from counterculture capital to conservative fraternity-row college town virtually overnight. The bitter disappointment he felt upon arriving there left a lasting impression:

In my teens, under the influence of the New Left, I felt we were moving forward into a new world of freedom. The late sixties was a very exciting time period. Then, all of a sudden my world became a slum. The seventies were politically very regressive. In Detroit and Ann Arbor, nothing of interest, culturally, was going on. I became disenchanted with the heroes of my youth, the White Panthers and other utopian politicians, and anti-aesthetics came to the fore.¹⁷

As an alternative to the MC5, Kelley turned to groups that seemed to eschew rock-and-roll norms and idealistic cultural politics. He was interested, for example, in Kraftwerk, a German electronic-based group that struck him as “a kind of joke on modernism—like the death of modernism turned into cheap pop music,” and Devo, which used deadpan irony and exaggeration to caricature rock’s commercialization, corporatization, and formulaic essence.¹⁸ He was also a big fan of the Art Ensemble of Chicago, an experimental jazz collective that combined conventional instrumentation with sounds made with bicycle horns, bells, birthday party noisemakers, wind chimes, and other found objects, and of Sun Ra, an iconoclastic big-band musician who melded disparate styles and categories—African music, jazz, science fiction, transcendental spiritualism, Egyptian poetry, electronic noise—and whose performances were as bewildering, excessive, and kitschy as they were inventive.¹⁹ Describing a concert he attended in the early 1970s, Kelley recalls that Sun Ra’s continual shifting of musical gears resulted in “the most intellectually and physically demanding show I have ever seen.”²⁰ To Kelley, Sun Ra’s eclecticism and outrageous theatricality underscored the constructed nature of both music norms and performance norms.

In 1974 Kelley and fellow Ann Arbor-based students Cary Loren, Jim Shaw, and Niagara formed the seminal noise band Destroy All Monsters. Named after a 1968 Japanese B-movie, DAM pursued extreme experiments in dissonance, fusing prerecorded tape loops, distortion, and sampling with knowingly inept improvisational instrumentation produced on the cheapest equipment available. Aside from Loren, who knew a little guitar, none of them were really able to play an instrument. Basically, DAM’s music was made from anything that could produce noise—used speakers, vacuum cleaners, hairdryers, toy organs run through broken guitar amps, squeeze dolls, rattles, old and damaged reel-to-reel tapes—collected from garage sales and garbage bins. The band collaged this noise with sounds taken from television and with tape loops made by Shaw from outdated pop records.²¹ They had no gigs; instead, they played in Kelley’s basement apartment or crashed parties. At a local comic book convention, they borrowed the Trekkie band’s sound system and repeated two lines from Black Sabbath’s 1971 heavy-metal anthem “Iron Man” over and over again until they were thrown out.²²

DAM's "songs" range from hypnotic orchestrations involving freeform jazz and eerie sci-fi effects to blaring rackets overlaid with asinine ruminations. Several feature the voice of Niagara, haunting and sardonic, and references to vampires, aliens, drugs, violence, and other macabre subjects. The band's twisted brand of comedy is equal parts adolescent, as in "Puke like a Motherfucker"—a recording of someone doing just that—and black, as in the necrophiliac "I Love You, but You're Dead":

Am I in heaven or am I in hell
I see your body, and I don't feel so well
Cuz it's dead
I love it
And it's dead
You can tell
Cuz it's bled
In the bed.

Such lyrics are backed by psychedelic reverberations, atonal harmonies, and screeching pseudo-expressionistic feedback. DAM's music is ridiculous but also at times mesmerizing, if not powerfully symphonic, belying the band's low-budget, deliberately dysfunctional musical devices.

Destroy All Monsters can most firmly be linked to the same irreverent strain of late-1960s and early-70s antirock music that appealed to McCarthy—groups such as the Mothers of Invention, as well as the Detroit-based Stooges (later Iggy and the Stooges). Openly contesting the prevalent belief in rock and roll as an engine of social and political transformation, these countercounterculture bands were among the first to underscore the internal contradictions of their own generation. The Mothers originated what Kelley calls an "abject aesthetic," producing songs that combined pop, rock, R&B, jazz, and electronic music styles with off-key singing, unconventional instruments, satirical lyrics openly devoid of idealistic commitment, and eccentric stage performances that often involved goading the audience to react. To Kelley, the Mothers were "one of the most politically aware musical groups of the period," a "realist band" representing an "anti-hippie reveling in the aesthetics of the ugly," and whose work "was meant to be a distorted mirroring of the values of dominant culture."²³ The Stooges took a similar approach. Combining conventional instruments with a range of noisemaking devices—vacuum cleaners, blenders, cheap instruments, various homemade contraptions—they offered vulgarity, idiocy, awkwardness, and snide humor as correctives to the loftier aspirations of more mainstream rock. Recounting a concert he attended in 1974, Kelley remembers being amazed by front-man Iggy Pop's persona—his discordant mix of sloppy transvestitism, contorted gesture, and moronic antics—and his antagonistic relationship to his audience. After stopping the show to have a fan thrown out, the band launched into a rendition of the rock classic "Louie, Louie." As Kelley notes, "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."²⁴ The band went on to play the song three times in a row, taunting the crowd at each interval, the show finally ending in a riot. The Stooges' assault on self-important, "progressive" music, its crude anti-aesthetic and aggres-

sive provocation, resonated with Kelley, who understood it as a direct outgrowth of Detroit-area dejection, along with what he saw as the depressing state of popular music in general. (Indeed, DAM's "Iron Man" performance can be seen as an homage to the Stooges' "Louie, Louie" routine.)

Destroy All Monsters was an even more puerile Midwest counterpart to the LAFMS, whose members were similarly raised on the farcical idiocy of the Stooges, the abject pastiche of the Mothers, and the perceptual disorientation of Sun Ra, among others.²⁵ And like the LAFMS, DAM viewed its cheeky manipulation of cultural modes, norms, and expectations in sociopolitical terms—an affront to politicized rock and its then-current commercialization. The band belonged to what Kelley refers to as "the era of broken promises," when those who had just missed out on the hedonism of the 60s resented the idealism of the recent past. That idealism, he explains, seemed a sham, "only then available on records stolen at Kmart or the mall along with other packaged fantasies."²⁶ In "Destroy All Monsters Interviews Itself," which appeared in the band's mid-70s self-published magazine, Kelley and bandmate Jim Shaw sum up their jaundiced perspective:

MK...What do you try to get across in your music, with your style?

JSA cross between absolute boredom and absolute anger, and sometimes prettiness, but not very often prettiness.

MK...Does your music stem from any kind of ideological sources?

JSI basically don't believe in anything.²⁷

Shaw had a profound influence on Kelley's artistic sensibility. Whereas the other band members' tastes tended toward camp, his crass aesthetic and penchant for jolting sonic juxtapositions were more appealing to Kelley, who had already been supplementing his antirock inclinations with a fresh interest in the work of John Cage, the minimalist compositions of Steve Reich, and the electronic music of Karlheinz Stockhausen and La Monte Young.²⁸ Shaw's visual work at this time was similarly jarring. In a freewheeling series of photomontages, for example, he combined a wide range of "low" media material—clippings from midcentury magazines such as *Life*, *Look*, and *Family Circle*; 1950s and 60s comics, including *Richie Rich* and *Little Dot*; pulp fiction monster imagery; anatomical illustration; cheap pornography—on the Xerox machines at the university bookstore where he worked.²⁹ Yet it was Shaw's nonconformist attitude, brash approach to culture, and patently ludicrous behavior in college that had the biggest impact on Kelley:

Meeting Jim Shaw in art school was very important to me; he became my artistic brother. What he was doing was just so incredible to me. His daily life was art. For example, he would dress like a mix of Manson and Jesus. People seeing him walk down the street would just turn and run. He made an amazing portrait painting of Manson that included the phrase "Love means never having to say you're sorry," taken from the popular movie *Love Story*. He was endlessly amusing and unafraid of doing outrageous things in public. He would set up a booth up at the Ann Arbor Street Fair, a feel-good crafts fair, and present his confrontational works. The next booth over would be selling macramé fern pot hangers. He was completely "postmodern."³⁰

In 1973, just prior to the formation of Destroy All Monsters, Kelley and Shaw collaborated on *The Futurist Ballet*, a performance event staged in the auditorium

of one of the university dorms. To draw an audience, they hung a series of posters across campus promoting fictitious lectures. One announced a “noted minimal artist and thinker” speaking on “squares interceding [sic] with isosceles triangles throughout art history,” another a “Putrificate and Imperial Chingon of the Final Church and Prof. of Hematophagy” (and devout follower of Charles Manson) speaking on the “therapeutic [sic] uses of necrophilia.” Yet another advertised a double bill: a debate, sponsored by the “Students for a Dogmatic Society,” between Weather Underground leader Bernardine Dohrn and notorious comic book censorer Fredric Wertham; and a talk by “D.W. Janson [sic], famous art history author and ordained Zoroastrian [sic] Priest” on “Zoroastrian [sic] Symbolism in Duchamps [sic] Large Glass and its influence on modern Zoroastrianism [sic].” When attendees showed up, they were subjected to an improvisational pageant of absurdity that included a pornographic reading, a stage full of random props, a reenactment of an interview with local performance artist and part-time stripper Pat Oleszko, and noise music produced with vacuum cleaners, untrained musicians, and tape loops.³¹ Kelley sauntered around in a dress, shouting and blowing into a saxophone; someone lectured at a podium while squirting a water pistol; a chalkboard displayed incomprehensible messages; a giant pack of cigarettes wandered across the stage.

The zany irrationality of this production recalls the nonsensical performances of early twentieth-century Dada, which Kelley knew from Lippard’s book and from an undergraduate art history course on the movement—a course he considered extremely important to his thinking at the time.³² *The Futurist Ballet* was also inspired by Luigi Russolo’s 1913 futurist manifesto “The Art of Noises.” Recently discovered by Kelley, it had a profound effect on him.³³ Destroy All Monsters was, for Kelley at least, an extension of those ideas. The band’s emergence marked the crystallization of his thinking not only about music but about the relationship between creative expression and its real-world context, art and life. To Kelley, DAM’s self-conscious affectation made it more artwork than music group, “a kind of sculpture—a sculpture of a rock band.” As he saw it, the group was firmly rooted in the historical avant-garde, in Dada certainly, but even more so in the expansive and explicitly political notion of sound theorized by Russolo. Like Kelley, Russolo was initially a painter with no musical training. Presenting his self-professed incompetence as a benefit rather than a limitation, Russolo called for a dissonant music based on the juxtaposition of machine-made sounds, a “musical noise” suited to the complexities of modern life and consistent with futurism’s utopian politics—its radical “determination to renew everything.”³⁴ Though devoid of such idealism, DAM’s approach was, in Kelley’s view, no less political; it was an assaultive deconstruction of conventional pop-music form, whose normalization he considered a type of “brainwashing.”³⁵ His developing visual art practice was similarly motivated, and Kelley even described the band as “my painting strategy made flesh.”³⁶ Like DAM’s music, his paintings from this period involve self-conscious clumsiness, artifice, absurdity, and bad taste. They are trashy, cacophonous works meant to dislodge social, cultural, and artistic norms.

The mid-70s undergraduate art-school program at Michigan was, in contrast, relatively conservative, its faculty steeped in Hans Hofmann-influenced formalism and, as Kelley remembers it, largely oblivious to anything conceptual.³⁷ Along with the New York School, Robert Rauschenberg was popular for his “gestural” use of

common materials and pop imagery.³⁸ Kelley, however, was more interested in artists who, like the bands he was into, brutally combined disparate forms and meanings, forcing consideration of entrenched categories. Along with Shaw's irreverence, Andy Warhol's use of shocking photojournalism as decoration was a touchstone for Kelley, as were a number of what were then less canonical sources, including Oyvind Fahlström's mix of abstraction and sociopolitical commentary and Jim Nutt's incorporation of low-budget advertising materials into cruel figural distortions.³⁹ Kelley combined these influences with a self-conscious embrace of failure and ineptitude as anti-ideals. "Cool was dead," he recalls. "I was definitely a loser fanatic."⁴⁰

Described by the artist as "willful perversions of my training" and "totally unacceptable in any art kind of way," Kelley's drawings and paintings from this time are awkward amalgamations of fringe popular culture and high-art style—formalist composition, comics, cheap advertising, erotica, commodity detritus, abstract shapes, expressionistic gestures, portraiture, text—jumbled together in disjointed, ironic, and confounding ways.⁴¹ These works often feature frilly craft-based materials and forms, deliberately intended as an affront to abstract expressionism and minimalism, both of which Kelley associated with an outdated art-school machismo.⁴² Again, his general approach paralleled that of Destroy All Monsters, which offered similar pastiches of "expressionism"—Kelley saw improvisational music as "analogous to painterly gesture"—popular form, and "low" subject matter, and whose deliberate dysfunction and adolescent humor were a conscious affront to prevailing macho "rock god" mythologies.⁴³ The 1976 *Painting with Hawaiian Mask, Ballerina, and De Stijl Painting* (fig. 2.1), for example, is a ham-fisted decorative mélange of cartoonish imagery and dumbed-down modernist languages—recalling artists as diverse as Degas, Picasso, Mondrian, and de Kooning—that refuses to jell into a coherent whole. Kelley drains these styles of any vestigial avant-gardism.

While such hybrid paintings certainly belong to a lineage of appropriation and collage, Kelley intended his approach to operate against the grain. In a catalogue essay for an exhibition of work from this period, he argues that whereas artists such as Rauschenberg similarly fused divergent elements, attention to cultural meaning in their work usually remained secondary to formalist concerns. Though debatable, Kelley's assertion is significant in that it demonstrates how he attempted to distinguish his work for its retention of content, of the "associative tensions between . . . loaded images, images that couldn't be reduced so easily to a kind of abstract equivalency."⁴⁴ His shoddy mid-70s paintings are early iterations of an approach that would characterize Kelley's art from that point onward. From the beginning, he explains, "I wanted people to think about how these images operated. I was always interested in work that when you first looked at it you said, 'I know what that means,' because it had this socialized veneer. . . . I wanted people to fall into it first, and then go, 'something's wrong.' But it's too late, you're already in there."⁴⁵

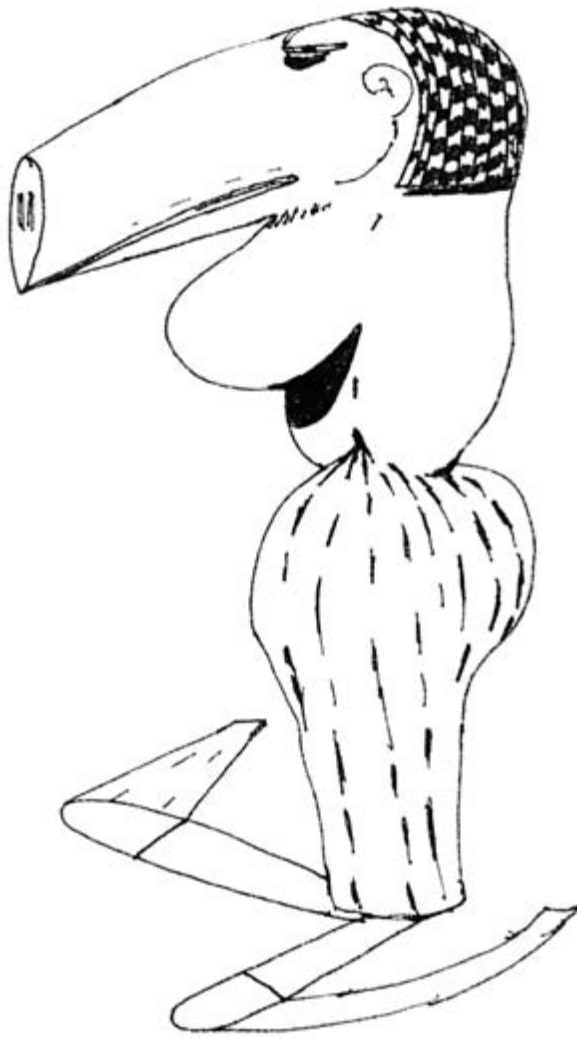
Forcing divergent motifs into collision and unhinging connotations, Kelley's concoctions are less akin to Rauschenberg's combines than to the politicized photomontages of Hannah Höch and John Heartfield, whose use of fragmentation and the recontextualization of readymade forms interested Kelley, though he dismissed their didactic messaging as agitprop.⁴⁶ His early drawings and paintings can also be linked to the more contemporary sources he has cited, including Fahlström and Nutt. The latter was especially significant, representing an alternative to the



21.
Mike Kelley, *Painting with Hawaiian Mask, Ballerina, and De Stijl Painting*, 1976. Courtesy Kelley Studio, Inc.

Rauschenbergian approaches promoted by his teachers. Kelley saw Nutt's work as a grotesque mixture of formalism and antiformalism—supremely contradictory in its painterly use of mass cultural materials whose degraded associations were simply too strong to be rendered invisible. Like all of these artists, Kelley deliberately made use of materials, techniques, and subject matter that are difficult to overlook or see through, preserving the social significances of the things he referenced or appropriated. Indeed, the efficacy of his work depends on the activation of such meaning—and the refusal to resolve the contradictions evoked.

Elegy to the Symbionese Liberation Army (1975; plate 8) features the Hydra-insignia of the tiny militant organization notorious for its sensational 1974 kidnapping of publishing heiress Patty Hearst, who then joined the group in its insurgency. The SLA saw itself as a more radical offspring of the counterculture, and its mix of violent crime, revolutionary rhetoric, and half-baked quasi-religious beliefs exposed crucial problems with the perpetuation of 60s-style idealism—and especially romanticized transgression—in the 1970s. Kelley adorns the SLA emblem with a zigzag fringe and situates it within a geometric composition of floral and faunal patterned wallpaper, green abstract-expressionist-type splashes, splotches of spray paint, and hand-cut strips of paper. The work is provocative in its offhand treatment of what was then an inflammatory and broadly recognizable image, here offered up as just one of many



nonobjective forms. Kelley's indifference undercuts extremist politics—not only on the Left but also on the Right, where groups like the SLA were viewed as the inevitable by-product of 1960s cultural degeneration, verifying the need for a return to traditional American values. Also from 1975, *In Anticipation of America's Bicentennial* attacks the rising jingoism of the moment by similarly combining loaded symbols with a mix of avant-garde and homespun aesthetics. Here, pseudopainterly forms overlay a kitschy stenciled centerpiece of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln silhouettes, positioned above two crisscrossed American flags. Like *Elegy to the Symbionese Liberation Army*, this work is political in its utter insincerity—in its open deposal of earnest cultural signs. The images of America's upcoming bicentennial celebration and those of the country's most ardent revolutionaries were, such works suggest, as interchangeable as the artistic styles of generations past, as political as wallpaper and ornamental frill. These were the painterly equivalents of Shaw's public acts—not unlike hanging a handmade picture of Charles Manson next to macramé fern pot hangers at the local street fair.

In a 1976 series of small "allegorical drawings" (fig. 2.2), Kelley combined Nutt's visual style with that of the cartoonists he had long admired, including Crumb,



2.3.
Mike Kelley, *Political
Cartoon (Sinister
Forces)*, 1976/2011.
Courtesy Kelley
Studio, Inc.

Roth, Miller, and Wolverton. These note-card drawings abound in “low” aesthetics, a freewheeling mix of wild distortion, crass humor, conflicting styles, absurdity, and incongruity. Provocative in their utter meaninglessness, they are essentially caricatures without an identifiable target. Several additionally recall Peter Saul’s “gestural” paintings of harsh and obscene subject matter, which Kelley also greatly admired at the time. Saul’s combinations of abstract-expressionist-type form and perverse, politically incorrect imagery seemed an affront to the pretentious transcendentalism of abstract art on the one hand and the self-righteous earnestness of “political” art on the other. He too was engaged in what Kelley understood as “a politics of the formal.”⁴⁷ *Political Cartoon (Sinister Forces)*, a 1976 drawing that Kelley converted into a 2011 print edition (fig. 2.3), is even more reminiscent of Saul’s work, both in style and

in substance. Here an African-American man sits atop a white “citizen of the world,” the former’s enormous snakelike penis squeezing the latter’s head and forcing itself into his mouth. Directly borrowing from Saul, Kelley affixed captions to his highly charged, stereotypical imagery. Yet whereas Saul’s sociopolitical critiques are usually pointed and specific, Kelley’s drawing is decidedly ambiguous. The “SINISTER FORCES” printed on the black man’s head is inflammatory, but it does not correlate with the adjacent banner that reads “LED ASTRAY,” the jewel in his hand labeled “THE REAL THING,” and the message (and bad pun) tattooed on his giant strangling phallus: “THE FALSE GOAL ONCE ATTAINED BECOMES CONSTRICTING.” The work is full of provocative visual and verbal elements that fall flat because they refuse to coalesce into either an overarching point or something at which to take offense. The effect is akin to McCarthy’s *Political Disturbance* from the same year. Like that stupefying performance, Kelley’s “allegorical drawings” have no discernible allegory, his blatantly incendiary “political cartoon” no discernible politic.

While at Michigan, Kelley also gained his earliest exposure to performance art, including Vienna Actionism and the work of Joseph Beuys. He especially admired Beuys, whose esoteric interweaving of language and objects was “a complete revelation” to Kelley. Though he knew the work only from photographs, he understood it as representing a new form of contemporary ceremony devoid of metaphysics—a fundamental distillation of exactly what Kelley thought art should be: “a materialistic ritual that deals with the stuff of life,” as he puts it. At the same time, however, Kelley rejected any direct equivalence between art and life. He saw art as a kind of “laboratory,” a specialized arena outside the morality of daily existence, but one that could shed light on the sociocultural norms and values that constitute that existence. “I didn’t want to dispense with art,” he recalls; “I thought this separation between art and life was good. I was against Kaprow.”⁴⁸

That perspective dovetailed with Kelley’s academic studies, specifically his interest in physiological psychology, which seemed to emphasize the unfixed, socially constructed nature of normality:

At the University of Michigan, I saw experiments with monkeys in which electrodes had been inserted into their brains. Research was being done on the physiology of perception and consciousness. I was particularly interested in the physiology of memory. One scientist was attempting to find physical memory traces induced in flatworms. I came to see the world as a construction of mental perceptual filters that could be compared, somewhat, to the Freudian concept of the superego. The slightest disruption of it, putting someone in an isolation tank, for example, reveals the system: people go insane. Insanity is the normal condition—that’s the “unconscious.” “Reality” is a by-product of social control: conditioning.⁴⁹

As with McCarthy, this concern with the basic mechanics of perception led him to the writings of R. D. Laing, whose analyses of social conditioning and coercion—the “madness” of what we call sanity—seemed to validate Kelley’s increasing suspicions. Laing’s theory bolstered Kelley’s conception of the human mind as “inherently schizoid,” of the fundamentally contradictory nature of thought and identity, and the dubiousness of a so-called reality constructed by social institutions, particularly the family: “Laing’s writings on the politics of the family had a great impact on me. The kinds of mental games that he describes as taking place in the

family unit were very recognizable to me. These games produce schizophrenia in some, and that's a not uncommon response. Laing's work strengthened my conviction that there is no reality, except provisional reality."⁵⁰ Kelley's absurdist art and music reflected this outlook. Along with the antirock of *Destroy All Monsters*, his decorative militant paintings, nonallegorical "allegorical" drawings, and nonpolitical "political" cartoons can be understood in relation to his growing doubts about supposedly rational thought, as can a host of like-minded works also produced toward the end of his undergraduate years. *Sheep Shape* (1976), for instance, is a nine-page "magazine" centered on a common theme but devoid of an overall logic. Among the appropriated images: a sheep-based cartoon about social conformity; a rather gruesome photograph of a cooked and garnished lamb staring out at the viewer; a sheep-lizard hybrid; a crude joke about farmers enjoying lamb bestiality. The common theme suggests some unifying rationale, but any attempt to tie these images together is inevitably futile. Works such as these deliberately frustrate one's predisposition to draw "logical" connections.

In 1976 Kelley left Michigan and *Destroy All Monsters* for Los Angeles, enrolling in Cal Arts' Graduate Program in Fine Arts. Drawn to the school for its interdisciplinary reputation, he intended to further develop his fusion of art and music, planning to study with electronic music composer Morton Subotnik and to participate in Cal Arts' Electronic and Tape Music Program. Upon arrival, though, he learned that art students were actually not permitted to take courses in the music school. Disappointed, he founded Polka Dot and the Spots, a short-lived band that he has described as "extremely crude and moronic," followed by the Poetics, formed in 1978 with fellow art students Tony Oursler and Don Krieger.⁵¹ Like DAM, the Poetics recorded on cheap equipment and embraced weird sound effects, dumb humor, absurdist performance, and crude instrumentation—at times Krieger played the "orgatron," an adapted toy organ remarkably similar to Joe Potts's optigan—and it was then that Kelley came into contact with the music scene that McCarthy was already a part of.⁵² (That same year, McCarthy's *CLOSE Radio* aired a Poetics work titled "Dream Lover," a composition referred to by Kelley as "a fairly elaborate, and cornball, sound piece.")⁵³ Kelley has acknowledged that Los Angeles was a hotbed of art-music experimentation at this time: "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."⁵⁴

Whereas McCarthy had been in LA since 1970, however, Kelley came just as this scene was being overtaken by the burgeoning punk movement. As Kelley saw it, punk was simply an "adolescent Oedipal backlash" against the 1960s counterculture. "If punks had really hated hippies," he explains, "they should have kept their mouths shut."⁵⁵ The movement also seemed to solidify the previously porous borders between art and music in LA, and a once permissive community grew increasingly hostile toward anything that did not conform to its aesthetic. Soured by punk's ascendancy and the conservatism that came with it, Kelley turned away from music. Visual art became his primary focus.⁵⁶

Cal Arts had changed too, and Kelley struggled to reconcile the tactics of his

undergraduate paintings and *Destroy All Monsters* with the cooler, more heavily conceptualist approaches advocated by much of the faculty at this time. “When I arrived at Cal Arts,” he recalls “I was suddenly faced with a group of artists and a set of art terminologies that were completely foreign to me. The faculty was composed primarily of conceptual artists, and photography, accompanied by text, was clearly a dominant methodology—‘photo/text’ was its abbreviated designation.”⁵⁷ Popular culture was, Kelley remembers, widely reviled at Cal Arts: “The general consensus . . . was that use of such material merely reiterated the values of the dominant culture, and critical usage of it was deemed simply impossible. The widely shared belief that pop art was an apolitical movement had seemingly closed the issue back in the 1960s.”⁵⁸ Refusing to stay within the confines of the school, he familiarized himself with the wider LA art scene and the other art schools in the area, including Otis College of Art and Design. At Otis, for example, he met brother artist-collaborators Bruce and Norman Yonemoto, whose humorous jumbling of incompatible materials—Marxist theory, comics, gay pornography, identity politics—was a refreshing alternative to the general aversion to “low” subject matter at Cal Arts.⁵⁹

Kelley nonetheless acknowledges specific links between his practice and the work of certain faculty members of the period. Though many of his professors—John Baldassari, Laurie Anderson, Douglas Huebler, Robert Cummings, David Askevold—made use of photo/text techniques, Kelley appreciated their attempts to shed the reductivism of earlier, “first-generation” conceptualists such as Lawrence Weiner, Joseph Kosuth, and Robert Barry. To Kelley, the academicization of the conceptualist “nonaesthetic,” its codification into a recognizable art movement, undermined its philosophical and political objectives—its emphasis on thought rather than materiality and its claim of circumventing art’s commodity status.⁶⁰ In addition to a greater acceptance of “narrative concerns” at Cal Arts, he singles out “Baldassari’s humor, Anderson’s folksy storytelling, Cumming’s flat-footed absurdity, and Huebler’s increasingly referential density” as important departures.⁶¹ Kelley particularly admired Huebler’s juxtaposition of mundane images and accompanying texts that one presumes are there to explain the work but instead destabilize it. Confronted by Huebler’s work, Kelley explains, “I am confused, which is surprising in that, on the surface, his work often looks so dumbly straightforward.”⁶² He also shared Huebler’s interest in “embarrassing and loaded themes” and credits him with providing a conceptual-oriented approach to sociopolitical realities—qualities that at the time made Huebler seem unhip to his most of his neoconceptualist students: “These younger viewers disdained the work precisely because it introduced unsavory topics that young, up-and-coming artists didn’t want to think about . . . I, for one, embraced his tactics . . . These embarrassing and loaded themes *should* be the material of art production.”⁶³

In actuality, Kelley argues, Huebler had more in common with that younger generation than with his own. Huebler’s mix of styles and references can, he points out, be understood as akin to David Salle’s attempts to level all imagery and style. Yet Kelley distinguishes Huebler for his retention of meaning despite the confusion elicited by his work; rather than drain meaning, as Salle arguably does, Huebler challenged viewers to negotiate its complexities.⁶⁴ Huebler holds contradictory meanings in suspension, rather than emptying them out.

Of all his Cal Arts professors, Kelley felt the greatest affinity with David

Askeveld, whom he has described as a “scientist of disorientation.”⁶⁵ Unlike other conceptualists who adopted the dry languages of academic textbooks and bland documentary photography, Askeveld drew upon more arcane forms of knowledge—superstition, alchemy, mystical rituals, the occult. His multimedia works often involve formal pseudological language structures that at first suggest explanation and rationalization but ultimately only further obscure his already esoteric subject matter. *The Ambit: Nine Clauses and Their Allocations* (1975–76) is a series of gridded panels of photographs and captionlike texts. In one panel, images of hand and arm shadows are coupled to an evocative but wholly impenetrable description: “This treatment is followed by one which circumscribes a nature but doesn’t present its abilities when this nature is too familiar with another; so these two in conjunction with this other cannot be connected together when the presence of this condition is not compatible with the third—especially if the demanding circumstance has formed an abstraction within the order of reference which resembles another and also is the identity within this order.” *The Ambit* was one of the first Askeveld works seen by Kelley, who describes the text as “a kind of psychotic legalese . . . descriptive—it states rules and sets conditions—but you don’t know what or for what.” The ultimate effect, Kelley explains, “is akin to reading an overly complex contract while enveloped in the twilight fog that descends on you after a heavy dose of cough syrup. Oddly enough, I find this extremely pleasurable.”⁶⁶

In other works, Askeveld combines mundane imagery with dense, enigmatic narratives—personal and historic, prosaic and poetic—in ways that suggest substantive links but resist any coherent rationale. Meaning is hinted at but never fixed. *Green Willow for Delaware* (1974) consists of a meandering poem and three photographs of a striped snake winding itself around a bunch of ball bearings:

It Continued To Rain All Day
 For Some Reason People Started To Talk About Delaware
 No One Knew Anything About It
 No One Had Been There Or Knew Anyone From There
 With The Rain All Day The Delaware Ambience Works On Us
 Delaware Seems To Be An Emission Center
 We Try To Reverse That Or Roll Something Back
 We Decide It Should Be A Black Hole
 That Would Make It Sink
 We Use The Balls To Push It A Distance First
 Some Of The Stripes Are Covered By Holders Making Them And The Balls Even
 The Willow Tail Broke Off In The Making
 If It Rolls Over I Have To Come Around To Bring It Back
 It Doesn’t Usually Roll Over
 I Agree To Let It Roll Over And Twist Over If It Wants
 We Like The Roll Better Than The Black Hole
 The Balls When Rolling Often Jam Together
 They Gradually Compress Packed Tightly Together
 Delaware Is The Black Hole And Sinks
 The Balls Follow The Two Leads

The work is for the most part incomprehensible, and yet there are just enough associative connotations between text and imagery—the mention of balls and stripes, for example—to compel one to try (in vain) to decipher it.

While at Cal Arts, Kelley encountered *Green Willow for Delaware*, along with three others works by Askevold, in Alan Sondheim's 1977 book *Individuals: Post-Movement Art in America*.⁶⁷ As he recalls:

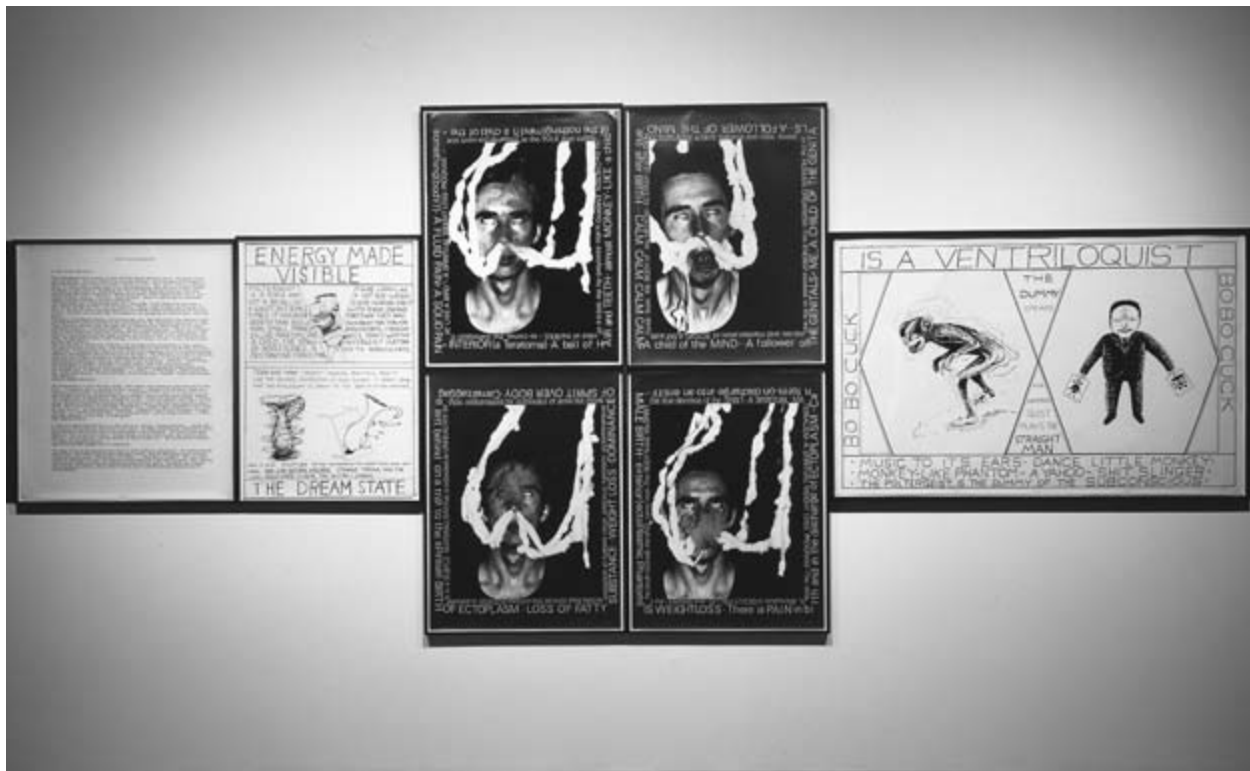
The writings, in particular, were a revelation. I was taken aback by their odd mixture of gamelike strategies, fractured, Burroughs-ish word and genre pairings, and weird ritualistic overtones. . . . David's perverse misuse of logic structures, his unusual applications of pulp fiction tropes, and his unembarrassed, romantic imagistic revelings were unlike anything I had come across before. All the positive aspects of mystical rapture were there—the ritual, the opulence, the inebriation, the rich, elusive symbology—yet mysticism's negative aspect, its faith in some transcendent beyond, was utterly absent. This was art, not religion, and its pleasures were material and constructed. As I perceived it, the message was “surrender to spectacle need not be mindless.”⁶⁸

The Poltergeist: A Work between David Askevold and Mike Kelley was a 1979 student-teacher exhibition at the Foundation for Art Resources in Los Angeles. The collaboration centered on their mutual interest in occult practices, particularly nineteenth- and early twentieth-century spiritualist photography, which used simple tricks to “document” the existence of paranormal activity, exploiting the public's presumption of photographic factuality. Askevold's part consisted of five panels with ghostly forms produced by simple photo effects—dodging, blurring, smoke, superimposition, projection—that are about as convincing as a B horror movie. Two images are circumscribed by the artist's typically obscure but strangely suggestive text. Kelley greatly expanded this interplay of word and image, contributing two black-and-white photographs of cartoonish drawings with lengthy captions; a panel of rambling text, some which was appropriated from literary sources on parapsychology; and four photographic self-portraits with eyes rolling back into his head and white “ectoplasm” flowing from his nostrils (fig. 2.4).⁶⁹ Each segment is laden with esoteric references and confounding ruminations on the nature of supernatural phenomena:

The poltergeist is born in heat; it comes from the inside, where it's warm. The ghost comes from the outside, you feel a blast of icy air when it's near. The Poltergeist is a resident of the subconscious and is freed in a fever—*Brain Fever*—born like a vision in a fevered state. It comes in the ecstatic state or in a fit of depression, when the door is open, whether by choice or under duress. . . . The corrupt body is attacked by antibodies, swelling is the accumulation of these agents (an army encamped around a foe). The Poltergeist is also an antibody—the anti- the body it is associated with. It functions like a fever to burn out internal sickness, but it is an all-encompassing sickness, not assigned to any particular part of the whole. In a state of confusion, the antibodies rush from here to there, en-masse, in a hopeless attempt to purge. . . .⁷⁰

And on and on. Kelley took Askevold's “psychotic legalese”—his warped logic, or, better, antilogic—to an extreme, to a new level of density, redolence, and mystification.

Both artists saw the *Poltergeist* project as a response, in part, to the surfeit of vernacular imagery and dry explanatory language in conceptualist art of the time. Kelley's laughably campy photographs, in particular, align antiquated spiritualist photography with contemporary photo/text art, highlighting the presumptions of media



transparency that underlie both. This method of exploding paradigms from within by “inappropriately” melding high-art style and references to fringe subculture recalls Kelley’s undergraduate paintings and foreshadows his budding career. His Askeveld-inspired deployment of formal pseudological exposition that at once enriches and confounds the images or objects to which it is coupled also became central for him.

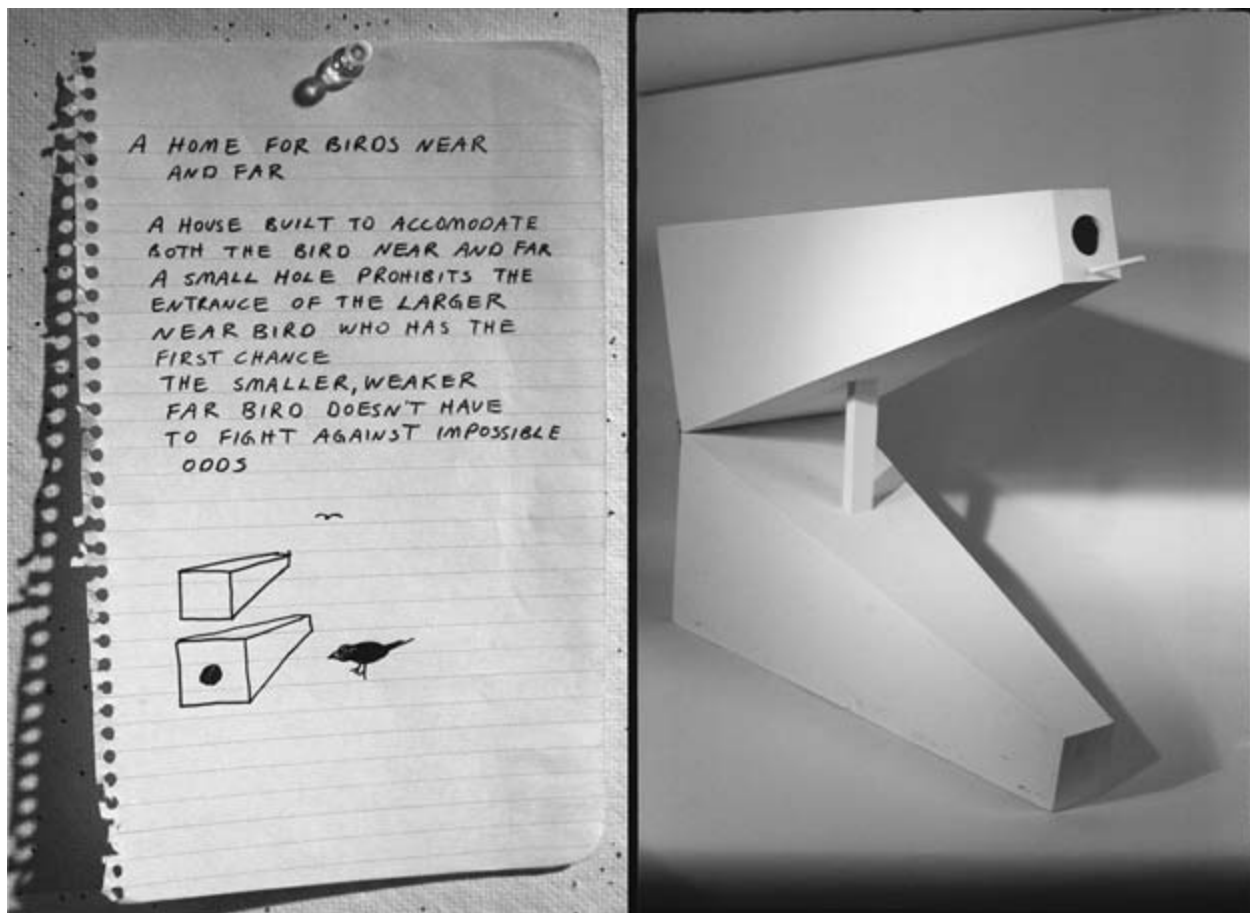
Kelley’s Cal Arts work often makes use of both tactics. In 1978 he handcrafted a series of white birdhouse sculptures that bring together multiple supposedly incompatible realms: they evoke craft culture, familiar to Kelley from his suburban Detroit upbringing, and the “blank” aesthetic of conceptualism and minimalism.⁷¹ As he explains, these simple, unadorned forms were “acceptable within the terminology of the time because they were reductive, they were primary structures of a sort,” and yet they were impossible to see exclusively as such.⁷² Not only were these objects utilitarian and overlaid with allegorical content, but their utter banality was an affront to the loftier philosophical concerns that seemed to occupy many of his Cal Arts teachers and peers: “My education [at Cal Arts] was in structuralism and deconstruction . . . a kind of deconstruction of science. I thought most Americans don’t give a fuck about science. Their belief systems are based on the mythologies of daily life. If I was going to do deconstruction, it had to be about the illogical logic, the learned poetic system which you don’t think of as poetry, you think of as truth.”⁷³ Kelley basically assumes the persona of a working-class Everyman who earnestly attempts to make “fine art” according to then-current rules and theories, but with forms (birdhouses) and materials (wood, nails, house paint) common to his own social milieu. Not unlike McCarthy’s early-70s action-painting and minimalism parodies, the works are pointedly ham-handed. They are deliberate failures, but in their failing they shed light upon the conventionality of art and its hermetic, class-based standards.

24.

Mike Kelley, *The Poltergeist*, 1979.

Courtesy Kelley Studio, Inc.;

Photograph by Roberto Marossi.



The earliest birdhouses were built directly from how-to manuals, but they quickly assumed strange shapes illuminated by idiosyncratic titles and “explanations” that seem to derive either from the mind of a madman or from some alternate physical universe. *Birdhouse for a Bird That Is Near and a Bird That Is Far* (1978; fig. 2.5) is a double-decker structure made of two trapezoidal boxes, one with a large hole and perch at the wide end and the other with a small hole and perch at the narrow end. The accompanying text offers a completely irrational rationalization:

A HOUSE BUILT TO ACCOMMODATE BOTH THE BIRD NEAR AND FAR
A SMALL HOLE PROHIBITS THE ENTRANCE OF THE LARGER NEAR BIRD WHO HAS
THE FIRST CHANCE
THE SMALLER, WEAKER FAR BIRD DOESN'T HAVE TO FIGHT AGAINST IMPOSSIBLE ODDS

Portraying a similarly baffling spatial paradox, *Wide Bird to Tall Bird* (1978) is a single trapezoidal box with a narrow slot and perch on each end—one horizontal, one vertical. Above a simple plus-shaped diagram, titled “a fully extended bird,” a text reads:

A BIRD WHO ENTERS WIDE COMES OUT TALL
THIS MEANS THAT IN THE CENTER OF THE HOUSE THE BIRD IS AN X

Kelley's MFA graduate exhibition at Cal Arts consisted entirely of his birdhouse

25.
Mike Kelley, *Birdhouse for a Bird That Is Near and a Bird That Is Far* and title drawing, 1978. Courtesy Kelley Studio, Inc.

series. Each exploits the viewer's presumption that there must be a sensible relationship between object and provided explanation, that there must be an underlying and accessible rationale. Kelley's disruption of such reasoning was meant to cast doubt not just on current art practices but on systematic thought itself. The poster he produced for the show features a bunch of chicks emerging from a brooder alongside a dictum that epitomizes Kelley's twisted conceptualism, his metaphysics of bafflement:

Assuming that the bird is
A symbol of the soul
Then
The birdhouse is the body
Or
All things carnal
Then
It stands to reason
That
Anything other than a
Birdhouse
Is
Unknowable
And shouldn't be built
Except in states of extreme
Self confidence
When
You can pretend you can.

This approach would govern Kelley's work from his Cal Arts days through the mid-1980s. His art moved increasingly into performance and involved even greater entanglements of words and things, the high and the low, the quotidian and the esoteric, the sacred and the profane. He began to conceive of his objects less as independent artworks and more as props, as "demonstrational sculptures" subsumed by ever more elaborate and lengthy texts, loosely based on specific themes and delivered in the form of lectures, incantations, polemics, or jeremiads.⁷⁴ Although the tone of Kelley's performances certainly differs from McCarthy's, they similarly involved extreme shifts of meaning caused by overlapping multiple mutually exclusive systems and by recontextualizing simple materials and things. And he too features fictitious personas who appear to methodically follow the "logic" of some alternative reality. Like McCarthy's buffoons, Kelley's characters at once elide any sense of personal artistic expression and challenge fixed notions of objectivity and normalcy.

Either alone or with one or two assistants, he would describe and demonstrate a range of crackpot devices and found objects, whose significances would change as his monologues morphed around them and he acted upon them—often in bizarre ways.⁷⁵ The strangeness of these demonstrations was compounded by Kelley's speaking tone, which was generally professorial, flat, and uninflected but would at times abruptly and inexplicably shift to ecstatic.⁷⁶ In preparation for each performance, he would research his subject matter and then manipulate the information he gathered, scrambling it, fragmenting it, rewriting quotations, and adding his own free association. He molded this material into labyrinthine scripts that,

like his earlier texts, were mind-boggling but systematically structured, with each sentence building upon ideas previously put forth and correlations both reinforced and obscured by wordplay, puns, cross-referencing, ersatz technical terminology, and expansive thematic threads. Kelley conceived of these performances as abstract musical compositions, paying particular attention to the rhythm and tone of his language. Though they were highly structured and preplanned, rather than improvisational, he thought of his orations as “a kind of theatrical form of music, using speech instead of electronic sounds.”⁷⁷ Kelley infused such orchestrations with ostensibly concrete but ultimately elusive significance, produced through the interaction of the verbal and the visual. Often supplemented with detailed diagrams, illustrations, and placards, his lectures endowed his crudely made contraptions and otherwise worthless odds-and-ends with weighty meanings, which seemed at once absurd and deductively reasoned.⁷⁸ The goal was a pseudoacademic presentation-performance that, as he puts it, “sounded rational, yet fell apart.”⁷⁹

My Space (1978) was a diatribe against plants. “If my behavior can affect plants, plants can influence my behavior,” he inveighed, beating a drum and circling a potted succulent. In a review of the performance, Richard Armstrong recounted what ensued:

Even as he insists that his behavior has nothing to do with the plant Kelley orients all his movements toward it, pointing and grimacing. Conceding the plant has its area of influence and he has his, he determines that he must stay out of the plant’s area—“that zone which is head distance around the plant,” as “that’s the area in which I am most likely to be affected by the plant/where my mind is most vulnerable.” Marking the radius of his arms at several points around the plant while lying with his head against it, he unwittingly draws a schematized flower: another dreaded plant! He insists, “My space isn’t like a flower/it’s mine/I a rose/no, I a man.” And so forth.⁸⁰

Though baffling, Kelley’s performance did not come across as simply random or insane. Rather, he maintained a sense of underlying “logic”—a striking achievement considering the absolute madness of his words and behaviors. As Armstrong concludes, “Kelley’s powers of incantation are such that in his hands the sum of his nonsensical language is credible. His slow, insistently tautological stage manner is convincing.” This counterintuitive effect was recognized by several critics at the time.⁸¹

Tube Music (1979) combined Kelley’s convoluted reasoning and predilection for half-baked mysticism with an anti-aesthetic clamor reminiscent of *Destroy All Monsters*. In this suite of short performances, Kelley and an assistant played various “instruments” made from cardboard tubes and aluminum foil and pounded a bass drum, while tape decks spewed out eerie drones and semicoherent messages. The episodes were linked by the performers’ ongoing ruminations on an opposition between “white noise,” which, according to some, contains ghost chatter or secret government transmissions, and “brown noise,” which supposedly causes people to lose control of their bowels. Kelley concluded the work by dramatically slamming down upon two whoopee cushions.

His next performance, *The Monitor and the Merrimac* (1979), was ostensibly based on the famous Civil War battle between the two ironclads, represented here by simple toy boats. Nautical references abounded—Kelley wore a crude sailor-

like outfit fashioned from garbage bags, repeatedly alluded to sea life, and struck drums and cans to represent cannon fire—while the ships were analyzed as if they were somehow models of human personality and modes of thought. Because of its rigid structure, Kelley explained, the *Merrimac* always makes “symmetrical decisions, human decisions”; the *Monitor* has a “wildly spinning turret” and therefore has “not a choice between the two, but countless choices.” Recorded texts were played, and Kelley rang a bell to underscore key words. Three diagrams were displayed: a water beetle attacking a fish; a whaling boat attacking a whale; and a description of the two warships’ futile combat.⁸² “You expected by the end that you would learn something about . . . a famous American Civil War battle,” Kelley recalls, “but in reality you didn’t. Because each thing made sense one at a time, the viewer felt secure. However, it didn’t make sense when you looked back on it as a totality.”⁸³

As Tim Martin points out, Kelley’s performances from this period “don’t fit the profile of any Performance Art mode or scene: neither the ritual-based, body-oriented, or agitprop work of the seventies, nor the budding performance-as-entertainment club-scene work in New York and Los Angeles, to name but two forms.”⁸⁴ Indeed, Martin argues, the comedic effects of Kelley’s ridiculous performances were, in part, a swipe at the sincerity of much contemporaneous performance-based work, with its consciousness-raising pretenses and “spiritual” aspirations.⁸⁵

Along with the art and music he was into, Kelley drew inspiration from certain literary sources. He admired the “syntactic effects” of the Comte de Lautrémont, whose mix of rhapsodic metaphorical layering and matter-of-fact tone lures the unwitting reader into a world of provocative but ultimately meaningless evocations. He was also interested in Raymond Roussel, whose eccentric associations and reliance on secret linguistic rules likewise dislodge meaning, revealing the very structure of narrative form. The work of William Burroughs left an even bigger impression on the young artist. To Kelley, Burroughs’s collagelike scrambling of widely diverse references exposed the mechanics of thought itself—a profoundly sociopolitical effect that for him was directly related to the lessons he drew from R. D. Laing: “Burroughs’s cut-up method, applied to texts and recordings, reveals submeanings that shine through the ordering structure of syntax. Burroughs calls this invisible ordering structure ‘the gray veil.’ And once you start to see through the gray veil of culture, then you can recognize it as a kind of brainwashing and control mechanism. This, for me, is the main lesson of Burroughs’s practice.”⁸⁶

These literary sources complemented the similarly disorienting work of several contemporary artists that interested Kelley in the late 1970s and early 80s:⁸⁷ Michael Smith, whose early work involved dumb prop humor, puns, and wordplay, and whose performance alter egos—a generic white male named Blandman, a diaper-and-bonnet-clad eighteen-month-old named Baby Ikki—dislocated social norms in ways that were at once hilarious and deeply unsettling;⁸⁸ Stuart Sherman, whose “Spectacle” performances involved tabletop demonstrations in which he would manipulate everyday objects—toy cars, dollhouse chairs, newspapers, rolls of tape, wind-up teeth—investing them with meaning by positioning them in seemingly logical but ultimately cryptic arrangements;⁸⁹ Julia Heyward, who combined performance, sound, image, and language; Guy de Cointet, whose own Roussel-inspired work involved enigmatic logic, infinite digression, open-ended

meaning, mixtures of high and low linguistic style, and the irrational explanation of props;⁹⁰ Vito Acconci, who employed deadpan repetitions of words and gestures, toyed with viewer expectations in morally ambiguous ways, and sought to displace everyday behaviors; and Matt Mullican, who upended philosophical categories via performances based on elusive pseudological systems, at once factual and fictitious, personal and public, sincere and absurd.⁹¹ While certainly not exhaustive, this list gives a sense of Kelley's appetite for art that uses mixed media and mixed references to effect a kind of structural dislocation of meaning—often in a humorous, deadpan way.

Kelley's intention was not just to confuse his audiences, or provide them with stand-up comedy or exotic surrealistic experiences, but to reveal the fundamental irrationality of rational thought itself—an objective already nascent during his undergraduate days.⁹² His performances were, he explains, “about belief systems. I thought of them as propaganda-gone-wrong.”⁹³ In a 1984 article titled “Michael Kelley: The Flow of Belief; Can Art Replace Wrong-Headed Thinking?” Kathi Norklun paraphrases Kelley's contention that his befuddling performances offer an important lesson about the construction of ideological belief: “The mind, says Kelley, is ordered but not rational. The reason for choosing some ideological stance, say left-wing politics, is not a rational decision but rather, if one traces it back, is apt to be the result of an association or series of associations leading back to a pleasant memory.”⁹⁴ This insight became and remained integral to Kelley's art. Indeed, whereas a later work like *Pay for Your Pleasure* is certainly more straightforward in its presentation, its use of text and images to disrupt what Kelley calls an “obviously overdone rationalization system” can be seen as a direct derivation of his earlier method. Confusion, in virtually all of his work, is calibrated to elicit self-awareness and doubt:

I want people to become aware of what they believe. I don't want them to say, “Mike Kelley is telling me about something.” I want them to confront their own biases. Most people approach art expecting to be told something, and that makes them feel very comfortable because then they can say, you know, some expert told me something. I want people to think about their own belief systems, and the work should be confusing and confrontational enough to cause them to question their own beliefs or at least realize that their belief system is perhaps an unconscious construct.⁹⁵

The audience responses to Kelley's performances confirm his point: some viewers “made sense” of Kelley's ruminations by projecting their own beliefs onto them and singling out parts that supported their interpretations;⁹⁶ others got angry, accusing him “of being apolitical or even of being a terrible person or a racist because [he] worked with inflammatory material and denied a point of view.”⁹⁷ This latter reaction shows how provocative ideological ambiguity can be—recalling similar responses to McCarthy's perversities, as in the 1976 *Political Disturbance*. Many viewers, however, understood what Kelley was up to, and his work was, from the beginning, generally well received. Christopher Knight, for example, recognized the profound implications of his performance *Confusion: A Play in Seven Sets, Each Set More Spectacular and Elaborate than the Last* (1982–83). Kelley, Knight explains, did not just dismantle logic systems, turning order into chaos. Rather, he built his own logic system as metaphor, turning chaos into an alternate chimerical order—and

thus exposing the illogic of all such systems and the arbitrariness of norms based upon them. “It was, in effect, the history of civilization.”⁹⁸

In the mid-1980s, Kelley turned away from live performance and the language-laden work of the previous seven or eight years, and back toward self-contained art objects. Not only did he find performance to be psychologically exhausting and economically unsustainable, but he increasingly came to see his assault on the rationality and belief systems of others as a denial of the specificity and socially constructed nature of his own perspective, voice, and motives.⁹⁹ The 1987 *Half a Man* series was pivotal. As will be discussed at length in subsequent chapters, the works in that series not only deal directly with social issues—gender, sex, youth, history, violence, repression, conditioning—but do so in ways that bring Kelley’s own identity into play.

With *Half a Man*, Kelley also returned to the subject of 1960s-style radicalism and its legacy. As part of the series he produced a set of handmade felt banners, initially exhibited alongside *Pay for Your Pleasure*. These works make explicit reference to the aesthetic of Sister Mary Corita Kent, whose combinations of modernist graphics and basic religious themes of charity, hope, kindness, peace, and love were endorsed in the 1960s by a Roman Catholic Church looking to make religion relevant to a new generation of young people.¹⁰⁰ As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, Kelley had been familiar with Corita Kent’s work since elementary school, and it helped define his earliest conceptions of art. Her upbeat polychrome style had also influenced the wider counterculture movements of the late 1960s.¹⁰¹ Connoting grassroots activism, heartfelt honesty, and populist values, it was especially suited to the sloganeering of that moment—“the decade’s decal dialogue,” as historian Benjamin De Mott put it in 1969—and its leftist associations have endured.¹⁰² By the time Kelley was making his banners, however, the style had been drained of any substantial politics. In 1985 the post office released a Corita Kent-designed “LOVE” stamp, which quickly became one of the most popular in US postal history.¹⁰³ A year later, Kelley sarcastically commented 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.¹⁰⁴

Kelley’s banners draw attention to the ways in which feel-good aesthetics are exploited on behalf of ideology, whether traditional or radical. Their messages, which are either disheartening or just plain inadequate, clash with their politicized, saccharin-sweet style and with the associations of felt itself, “an embarrassingly humble, even effeminate, craft material whose very name even puns on the idea of sensation and sensitivity,” as artist and critic John Miller has put it.¹⁰⁵ In *Trash Picker* (plate 9), 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.” While borrowing her style, Kelley has stripped the euphemisms, poetic flourishes, and puns from Corita Kent’s inspirational catechisms, delivering an



26.

Mike Kelley, *Let's Talk*, 1987. Courtesy Kelley Studio, Inc.

insipid affirmation of faith that is emphatically unsatisfying. Using first-person pronouns, he offers the private confession of a lowly trash picker, whose proud assertion—really just a feeble reiteration of Corita Kent's popular pieties—comes off as laughably dim-witted. In *Heart and Flower*, a valentine-patterned border surrounds a red-felt blotch resembling a pool of splattered blood. The image conflates flower-power with butchery. *The Escaped Bird* features 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 clearly derive from counterculture graphics, but such associations are deliberately made to fall flat. *Heart and Flower* and *The Escaped Bird* are so severely pared down that their components simply float in suspension without any context; they have no deeper purpose or significance. Hippie lingo and style are hollowed out, becoming nothing but pure facade, and a format originally prized for its clarity and sure-footed idealism is transformed into something strangely equivocal and discomforting. As political signage, these banners fail miserably.

In *Let's Talk* (fig. 2.6), the clash of image and text is more complicated—and disconcerting. A cookie jar occupies the center of the banner, surrounded by the text “LET’S TALK ABOUT DISOBEYING.” Kelley again attacks both the rhetoric and the rhetorical style of 60s-era sloganeering. The warm, homey feel of the cookie jar, with its rounded shapes, floral pattern, and bubble lettering, conflicts with both the meaning and the form of the bold typeface, producing a discordant mix of domesticity and dissent. The work is politically suggestive but ultimately confounding. It could just as easily refer to parental control—cookies being the behaved child’s most cherished reward, an object of desire whose withholding serves as a punishment for disobedience. This allusion to childhood also fits Kelley’s view of the Corita Kent-inspired aesthetic, which to him “elicits a joyous primitivism” meant to tap into “the child in us” and through which “we infer the rules of authority and the family—the patriarchy.”¹⁰⁶ Whether meaning is drained or discombobulated, what remains in these banners are only the empty shells of antiquated visual and verbal styles, exposed as manipulative and deceptive; the supposed authenticity and folk-art honesty of their simplified prose and homespun aesthetic become nothing more than obsolete, ideologically motivated conventions.

While carrying over the lessons of his eccentric photo/text work and performances—namely, the rejection of media transparency and the notion that meaning is dependent on context—Kelley thus began to tackle cultural politics more directly. His work became less about overloading arbitrary things and themes with concocted, freely associated significance and more about the socially constructed meanings already connoted by particular objects, materials, artistic techniques, and forms. As Kelley remembers it, *Half a Man* served as a kind of Pandora’s box: once he moved into the larger social arena, he could never go back. The issues were too big, the implications too great.¹⁰⁷ Yet Kelley retained the core methods of his formative years, those acquired during his undergraduate days and developed during his early Los Angeles period. He continued to draw on mundane or fringe subject matter as a foil for “high” culture and academic thought and to use juxtaposition, grotesque mixing, and jarring recontextualization to destabilize social realities—“the mythologies of daily life” and “the illogical logic” commonly taken for truth.

THREE

RAYMOND PETTIBON: A DEMOCRACY OF SPLIT PERSONALITIES

Born Raymond Ginn in 1957, Raymond Pettibon grew up in Hermosa Beach, a middle-class community on the South Bay outskirts of Los Angeles. He drew a great deal as a child, but his primary exposure to the arts came initially in the form of literature. His father wrote, illustrated, and self-published spy and noirish detective novels and taught English on military bases and various colleges and junior colleges in the Los Angeles area. The walls of Pettibon's childhood home were lined with books—both “high” literature and pulp, including his father's collection of censored 1950s-era suspense and horror comics.¹ Some of Pettibon's earliest memories involve reading. “I don't think there's any question that I was influenced by the work my father was doing,” he recalls. “I really come more from the word than the image.”²

Pettibon's parents were decidedly nonideological. His father's politics tended toward conventional Cold War anticommunism, but he never succumbed to an us-versus-them mentality; he was renowned in the community for his nonconformist lifestyle and eccentric intelligence. Pettibon's mother, an Estonian immigrant who escaped the Soviet armies during World War II, knew firsthand the dangers of ideological certainty and made a point of avoiding it.³ The young Pettibon was himself very interested in politics, but, like Kelley, he came of age just as a post-60s sense of disenchantment was setting in. “By the time I was independent enough to do something drastically dramatic like join a community, protest a store or run away,” Pettibon explains, “it was already over.”⁴ He was drawn to anarchism as an alternative to conventional politics and rejected—as he still does today—any association with a political party or activist cause.⁵

Unlike many artists of his generation, Pettibon did not attend art school. In fact, he has never taken a single art or art history class. Graduating high school in 1974, he briefly attended El Camino College before enrolling at UCLA later that year. At this time he began to combine his interests in writing and drawing, primarily in the form of political cartoons. An untitled work from 1975, for example, is a mock campaign poster for Jimmy Carter. Wearing Superman tights and a nerdy sweater and tie, the candidate gracelessly lifts the Liberty torch. “WHY NOT THE BEST?” reads a banner at his feet, next to which a saluting Uncle Sam proclaims, “HE'S GOOD ENUF FOR ME!” Several of Pettibon's cartoons were printed in the *Daily*

Bruin, the UCLA school newspaper. In one (fig. 3.1), a dimwitted Gerald Ford rides a hobby horse while Henry Kissinger and Nelson Rockefeller look on. “IF THAT GUY HAD AN OUNCE OF BRAIN HE’D BE DANGEROUS,” Kissinger announces. “LIKE YOU, HENRY?” Rockefeller responds. In another, Kissinger is dressed as a pimp, offering a transvestite Ford to a character labeled “WORLD LEADERS.” Though Pettibon’s acerbic sensibility would remain, he soon grew weary of such cartooning, finding its topicality too limiting, its reductive messaging overly simplistic.⁶

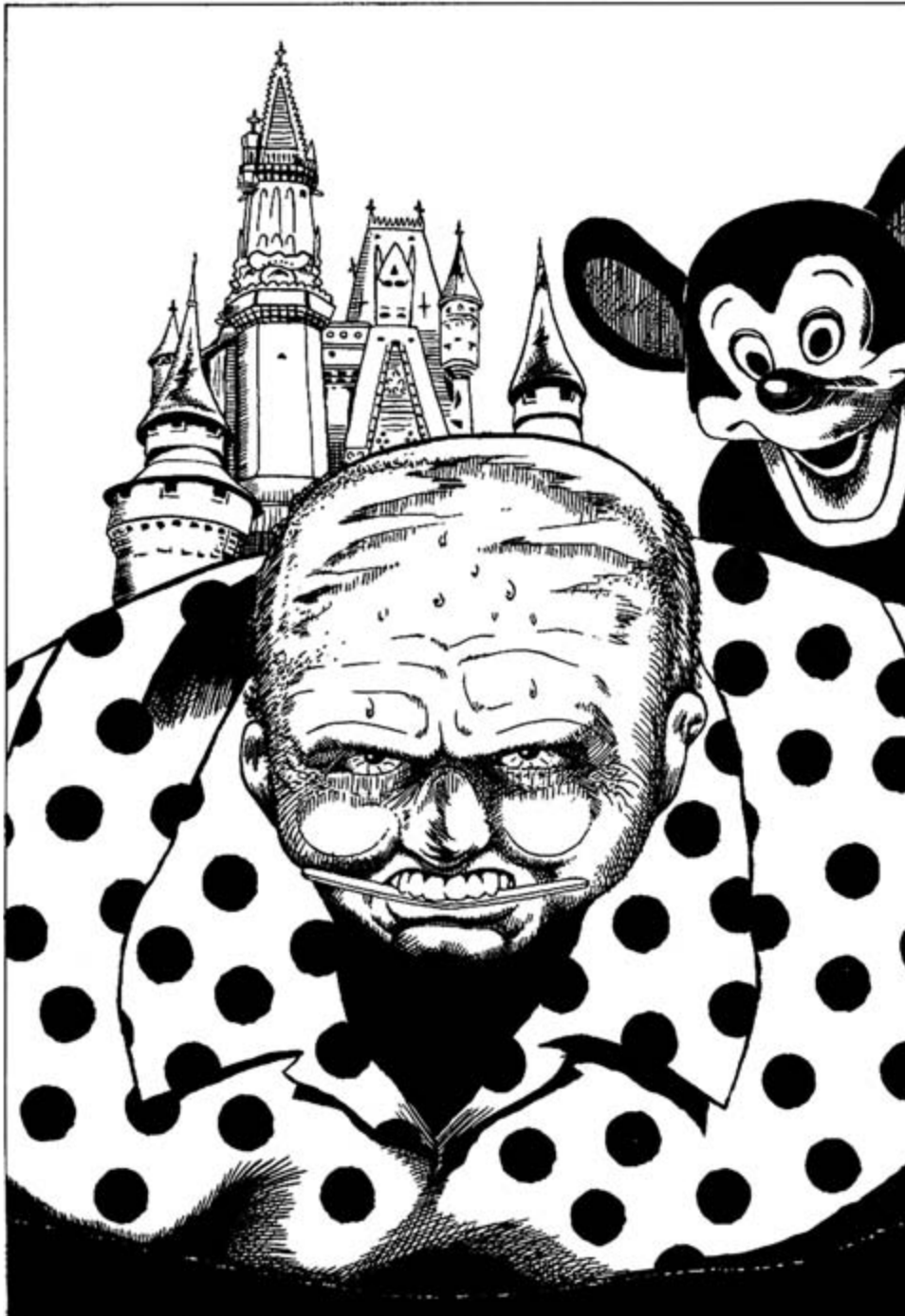
Moreover, he was not all that interested in visual art during college. He did take several literature courses, but he majored in economics, studying with influential economists Axel Leijonhufvud and Robert Clower and intending to pursue the subject as an academic career.⁷ Pettibon sees his economics background as crucial not only to his later art but to his outlook overall, providing insight into large social and institutional systems and the broad patterns and complexities of human behavior. “It’s a way of looking at the world,” he explains, “more toward raising doubts than certainties.”⁸

Upon graduating UCLA in 1977, at age nineteen, Pettibon got a job teaching mathematics in a Los Angeles high school. He taught for a few years at various schools, while increasingly focusing his attention on drawing. He adopted his nom de plume—a variation on the nickname “Petit Bon” given to him by his father—and in 1978 he self-published his first artist book. Titled *Captive Chains*, it is essentially a two-part black-and-white comic, with a glossy cover and text boxes paired with high-contrast drawings. The first part is steeped in 1950s-style aesthetics and lingo—a mix of film noir, crime comics, and popular movies based on youth rebellion and delinquency. (The opening cityscape was taken directly from *West*



3.1.

Raymond Ginn (Pettibon), political cartoon (Ford on hobbyhorse), *UCLA Daily Bruin*, 1975. Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles © Raymond Pettibon.



32.
Raymond Pettibon, No
Title, *Captive Chains*,
1978. Courtesy Regen
Projects, Los Angeles
© Raymond Pettibon.

Side Story.)⁹ Yet the book's seemingly conventional comic format is a set-up. What begins with a semicoherent storyline shifts abruptly from page to page, and as a result the book reads like a collage of narrative segments patched together from different sources. Stories remain incomplete, linked only by the dark themes they share—street gangs, sex, knife fights, rape, violence, teen prostitution, drug use. They are also devoid of heroes.

The fragmentation is even more extreme in the second part of the book, which consists entirely of independent full-page drawings—the earliest manifestations of what soon became Pettibon's signature visual style. Bizarre and often ruthless,



they include Nazi fetishists, a savage abortion, a priest in the electric chair, and other equally disturbing—and darkly humorous—scenes. In one (fig. 3.2), a sweating man lies bound and gagged on the floor, apparently being sodomized by Mickey Mouse. Disneyland’s Cinderella Castle looms overhead. Another (fig. 3.3) features Adolf Hitler awkwardly posing for a photograph while he receives a “Citizen’s Award of Merit” from the West Berlin, New Jersey, Chamber of Commerce.

Despite the book’s design, Pettibon was never himself much of a reader of comic books, underground or mainstream, and he is generally dismissive of the self-imposed restrictions placed upon the genre:

I love the form but I just don’t think there has been much done in it. . . . It should be as legitimate an art form as any but the problem is they don’t want to play on the same playing field as everyone else. On one hand, they’re bitter about being looked down upon by the rest of the art world, but when it comes down to it, they’re happy being in their own world and having their own standards. There’s an attractiveness to being ghettoized. . . . They’re the kind of people who are into what they themselves call bad films. They have this inverse high-low kind of thing that they celebrate.¹⁰

Captive Chains was unlikely to appeal to many comic book fans, and in truth Pettibon was uncertain as to what kind of audience he was after and who would buy such a publication.¹¹ (Very few actually sold.) He maintains that the book’s format was simply pragmatic: as unlikely as it was for comic readers to purchase

33.
Raymond Pettibon, No
Title (Citizen’s award
of), *Captive Chains*,
1978. Courtesy Regen
Projects, Los Angeles
© Raymond Pettibon.

his work, it seemed at least more feasible than breaking into the late 1970s gallery and museum world, which Pettibon saw as completely closed off to drawing.¹² Nevertheless, his then-emerging graphic style was unquestionably derived from the visual shorthand of comic-book imagery, and he has elsewhere credited classic comic artists Milton Caniff, Frank Robbins, and Bernie Krickstein as important influences.¹³ The ways in which *Captive Chains* plays with comic-book conventions suggests that its format was more deliberate and pointed than the artist has claimed. Pettibon uses it to lure the reader into a world of irresolution and confusion that contradicts the presumed moral and narrative clarity such a format typically connotes.

Pettibon also cites canonical art-historical influences, including Francisco Goya, Edward Hopper, William Blake, Joseph Pennell, John Sloan, and Reginald Marsh.¹⁴ Each of these artists prefigured at least some of the essential attributes of Pettibon's developing style—bold visuals, bleak subject matter, black humor, social commentary, the interaction of images and texts. He is also heavily indebted to cinema. Pettibon's stark, high-contrast graphics certainly owe much to film noir, and his use of structural fragmentation was directly influenced by the avant-garde montage theory of Sergei Eisenstein.¹⁵ Like the Soviet director, Pettibon exchanges narrative coherence for juxtapositions of suggestive imagery—an effect that became, along with the noir aesthetic, an essential and enduring component of the artist's work.

As mentioned, however, Pettibon's earliest influences were literary. He was, and remains, an avid reader of what he calls “the great prose writers,” including Henry James, Marcel Proust, John Ruskin, Walter Pater, and Thomas Browne. From them Pettibon cultivated his own stylized literary flourish. They also provided him with a rich stockpile of evocative phrases and lines from which he could borrow, extrapolate, and interpolate. As the artist explains of these authors: “They're very elaborate, and the sentence structure can elaborate itself into very long paragraphs. But in a fragmentary way. Their work, taken out of context, can mean something completely different, and at the same time it's so beautifully said.”¹⁶

Henry James was particularly significant. Pettibon has long admired the intricate flow and tension of James's language and the way it often seems about to dislodge itself from narrative:

James, especially in his later career, had such a complicated mind. He was writing in a narrative form, but he couldn't for the life of him look at the simplest thing without looking at it at it from many different views. He always writes out of an inner struggle between the dramatic form and narrative, and this wealth of ideas and information that's imploding in each sentence. . . . You immediately lose the thread of the narrative, and it seems like he's meandering around in language. But he actually isn't. He's desperately trying to keep control.

To Pettibon, James's multivoice, multidirectional prose is a faithful representation of reality and its relationship to the complexities of thought and perception. “To pretend to tell a simple story and tie everything up at the end is actually wrong,” Pettibon declares. “It's dishonest.”¹⁷

He also, like Kelley, admired the collage aesthetic of William Burroughs, and Pettibon's use of fragmentation can certainly be linked to Burroughs's cut-up technique.¹⁸ Yet while he acknowledges the influence, Pettibon distances himself from the randomness of Burroughs's practice and that of certain Dada and surrealist

artists who similarly embraced collage methods, along with free association and automatic writing. Pettibon's juxtapositions are often unresolvable, but like Eisenstein's, they are never arbitrary. "You can say it's open-minded," he says of his own work, "but it's never a random association between the language and the image. There's always a reason."¹⁹

Pettibon spent his early career closely connected to a local music scene. Indeed, of the three artists, he can most firmly be linked to a more or less cohesive music-based subculture—and his early experiences with that subculture had a profound and lasting impact on him. From 1976 to 1977 he occasionally played bass guitar in Panic, which soon after became the renowned Los Angeles punk band Black Flag—a name change suggested by him.²⁰ The band was founded by Pettibon's brother Greg Ginn, a former economics major at UCLA and budding engineer whose turn to music was inspired by the Stooges, the MC5, and other proto-punk musicians.²¹ Ginn also created SST Records, one of the foremost independent record labels of the time.²² Pettibon did not remain a member of Black Flag, but he designed its iconic logo, and his drawings appear on nearly all of the band's early album covers and concert flyers, in addition to those of other SST bands. The label also published and distributed his books following *Captive Chains*. As music critic Michael Azerrad puts it, Pettibon's work "was a perfect visual analogue to the music it promoted—gritty, stark, violent, smart, provocative, and utterly American."²³ In the music world, his black-and-white photocopy style is virtually synonymous with LA punk.

Though a few years later and certainly more popular than the noise music of Destroy All Monsters and the Los Angeles Free Music Society, punk similarly positioned itself against the perceived insularity and escapism of post-1960s rock and roll. Emerging in the mid to late 1970s, it sought to rein in the musical indulgences of the decade and reestablish a critical edginess, striking an intensely antisocial, if not downright nihilistic, tone. In many respects, punk was a revival of rock's traditional virtues—sincerity, directness, individual freedom, antiestablishment—cast as an alternative to the apparent conservatism and excessive commercialism of current popular music, vilified as an instrument of mass social conformity.²⁴ Punk's stripped-down, unpolished sound and belligerent tell-it-like-it-is lyrics provided an angry voice to a disenchanted and pessimistic youth subculture, while its do-it-yourself (DIY) approach to music production was championed as a way to circumvent the corporate record industry.

At the time, both fans and music critics aligned punk with subversive politics. Rock journalist Greil Marcus, for example, celebrated it as a transformative political movement whose central tenet was the idea that "a demystification of rock 'n' roll might lead to a demystification of social life."²⁵ As sociologist Simon Frith pointed out in 1980, "Within a few months of its public emergence, . . . virtually every left paper agreed that Punk was a Good Thing," granting it a degree of radicalism that, to Frith, "involved not cultural analysis but a purely rhetorical optimism."²⁶ Indeed, the politics of punk was not far removed from that of 1960s folk-inspired protest music, in which raw, unadorned form was similarly equated with honesty and integrity. As Frith noted, punk was often seen as "a transparent image of a real youth condition . . . a direct expression of the way things were—a kind of realism."²⁷

Black Flag represented an especially virulent strain of American punk, a late-70s and early-80s “second wave” that sought to reassert and amplify this so-called realism. Called hardcore, this offshoot was inspired by the frank hostility and cantankerous sound of early punk, but dissatisfied with punk’s rapid popularization and corporatization. Partially rooted in the suburban outskirts of Los Angeles—particularly the South Bay beach communities, described by SST co-owner Joe Carducci as “a unique mix of bohemia, blue-collar, redneck and Hippie/Beach culture”²⁸—hardcore attempted to salvage the movement’s subversiveness, positioning itself as a “working-class” rebellion, in contrast to what was seen as an elitist and overly commercial Hollywood crowd.²⁹ According to hardcore enthusiast Steven Blush, “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.”³⁰ As music critic Barney Hoskyns puts it, hardcore distinguished itself from punk by being “younger, faster and angrier, full of the pent-up rage of dysfunctional Orange County adolescents who’d had enough of living in a bland Republican paradise.”³¹ Offering a hyperconfrontational attitude and a style of music driven by short, provocative lyrics that were usually shouted over a repetition of fast, heavy chords, Black Flag epitomized this more ferocious and supposedly more authentic variety of punk.

Pettibon certainly considered himself a part of the hardcore scene, and he spent a lot of time at the Church, a vacant Hermosa Beach building that served as the primary South Bay punk hangout and rehearsal space.³² (Much of Penelope Spheeris’s 1980 punk documentary *The Decline of Western Civilization* was shot there.) Yet while a fan of the music, Pettibon was suspicious of the rigid conformity of his community and its wholesale commitment to a “no future” ideology, which he saw as extremist and overly reactive. “I believed in it for about two weeks somewhere between the ages of 15 and 18,” he recalls.³³ “It defined itself by being anti-sixties and hippies . . . and when you do that, you’re kind of stuck with the parameters of what you’re defining yourself against.”³⁴ Pettibon questioned the punk contention that music and style could somehow translate into radical real-world change. Indeed, he was skeptical about the very idea of such change: “You’re not gonna form a new system in the shell of the old, and why should you want to, anyway? What would be a perfect punk world?”³⁵

Pettibon’s skepticism prefigured later, more critical accounts of punk and its offshoots. In 1986, for example, music historian John Street praised the visceral expressionism of hardcore but dismissed its loftier aspirations: “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.”³⁶ As David Ensminger more recently put it, with hardcore, “punk militarized itself, developed divisions and classifications, and infrequently transgressed those same borders.”³⁷ The movement’s extremist reassertion of subcultural conventions and youthful idealism resembled the last-ditch efforts of John Sinclair’s MC5, who less than a decade earlier had tried to reradicalize a 1960s counterculture in decline. Both attempted to breathe new life into what they saw as moribund and overly commercialized movements—and indeed, in the late 1970s and early 80s the MC5

came to be seen as “proto-punk.”³⁸ (Sinclair also presaged the DIY ethic, proclaiming in 1971 that rock must “be controlled by the people who produce it and the people who use it.”)³⁹ Taking punk’s anti-institutional pose at face value, hardcore musicians and fans often overlooked the movement’s social and historical context—the fact that the music derived not from the barricades but, as music critic Chris Morris later put it, from “the malaise of monied yet disenchanting male teens who lived on the beachfronts south of L.A.”⁴⁰

Pettibon’s art refuses—and at times explicitly calls into question—the political pretensions and realist self-image of his own milieu. His early work must be understood in relation not only to LA punk but to the scene’s concomitant visual culture, epitomized by fanzines, or “zines”—abundant, crudely produced, hand-written or typo-ridden booklets produced by fans for fans and sold inexpensively through the mail. Originated by science fiction buffs in the 1930s and 40s, and fueled by advances in mimeograph technology and the growing popularity of alternative presses, this underground self-publishing industry had blossomed in the 1960s, especially among rock-and-roll fans.⁴¹ With the rise of punk, zines boomed again, now bolstered by the increasing accessibility of photocopy machines. Arguably, such publications represented punk’s style, mode of distribution, and sensibility as much as the music did. Like the raw riffs and confrontational lyrics, the cheap DIY anti-aesthetic of zines was meant to connote authenticity, anticommercialism, and brute honesty.⁴²

Along with its counterparts in New York, London, and other cities, Los Angeles punk spawned a plethora of zines, the bulk of which were short lived. The most prominent in LA were *Slash* and *Flipside*, both of which debuted in 1977. With its large tabloid format, relatively professional production, and wide distribution, *Slash* resembled a conventional magazine, and it helped legitimize the Southern California scene nationwide. *Flipside*, on the other hand, was the quintessential LA punk zine. As Hal Negro of the LA-based band Hal Negro and the Satintones recalls: “*Flipside* was like the Bible. . . . *Slash* was a real kind of magazine but it became very new wave and trendy, very arty, but *Flipside* was more folkish, more about the grassroots DIY side of punk. . . . The other mags were about other people looking at the scene. But *Flipside* was the scene.”⁴³ *Flipside* was a hodgepodge of gossip, rumors, punk-celebrity sightings, record reviews, editorials, interviews, photographs, and drawings, all slapped together in a rough cut-and-paste format. It often included self-aggrandizing taglines admonishing punks to buy the zine, send money, or purchase advertisements, as well as ruminations on the differences between true punks and poseurs. *Flipside*’s very first article (August 1977), for example, was a transcribed rant by the zine’s pseudonymous editors about how a local clothing shop was commercializing the punk style. “Tory” declares: “Real punks are the punks that make they’re [sic] own clothes because they have no alternative. . . . The place to go is THRIFT STORES, make your own, get old paint and splatter it on. . . . It’s free—safety pins are cheap.”⁴⁴ The October 1979 issue praises Black Flag—“sometimes it takes the suburbs to bring out the tru [sic] frustrations of living in the Southland”—alongside flyers with Pettibon drawings (fig. 3.4).⁴⁵ A Black Flag interview in the December 1980 issue also features Pettibon flyers, and “Ray” is mentioned as the band’s artist. In that interview, his brother Greg Ginn attempts to distance the group from its established ideological reputation and that of hardcore



34.
Page from *Flipside*,
October 1979.

in general: "There isn't any message. . . . We don't want to get on stage and be authority figures and tell people what to do, we feel that that's wrong. We want to get up on stage and create an atmosphere where people can think for themselves."⁴⁶

The 1970s Los Angeles art scene had its own alternative publications, including *Journal*, *High Performance*, and *The Dumb Ox*. Though not nearly as crude, such publications similarly helped define an emerging artistic and intellectual community.⁴⁷ There was, however, very little crossover between the two communities, despite the fact that these art publications did occasionally cover certain forms of experimental music and sound art, including that of Paul McCarthy and the LAFMS.⁴⁸ A rare convergence of art and punk in a 1978 issue of *Journal* only confirmed this division. In a short piece titled "Teen Genius," LA punk icon and cocreator of *Slash* Claude Bessy (aka Kickboy Face) lists fifty current examples of zines, after which he announces:

If you have never read one of those disposable punk manifestoes it is doubtful you will start now. If you don't know anyone who's putting out their own xeroxed or mimeographed sheet of venomous fanatical rock and roll beliefs you must surround yourself with a very sad crowd. The fanzines are taking over. For each one that dies (average life-expectancy around 3 months—then boredom sets in) two pop up out of some kids' rock n roll damaged brain. The list above is but a vague indication. In two months the names will be different. The hatred and the contempt will have focused on other musicians, other figures. How much will your own ideas have evolved in the same time? How much closer to total mental immobility will you be? FANZINES ARE NOT FOR EVERYONE.⁴⁹

Bessy's belligerent reprimand is telling. It reveals the exclusivity shrouded by punk's populist veneer, along with the determined politicization of the youth-based subculture and its agitprop ephemera. That this treatise was published in an art magazine is also significant; Bessy pits the LA punk scene against the LA art scene, which he sees as not only behind the times but unworthy of being informed. Punk zines were categorically not art.

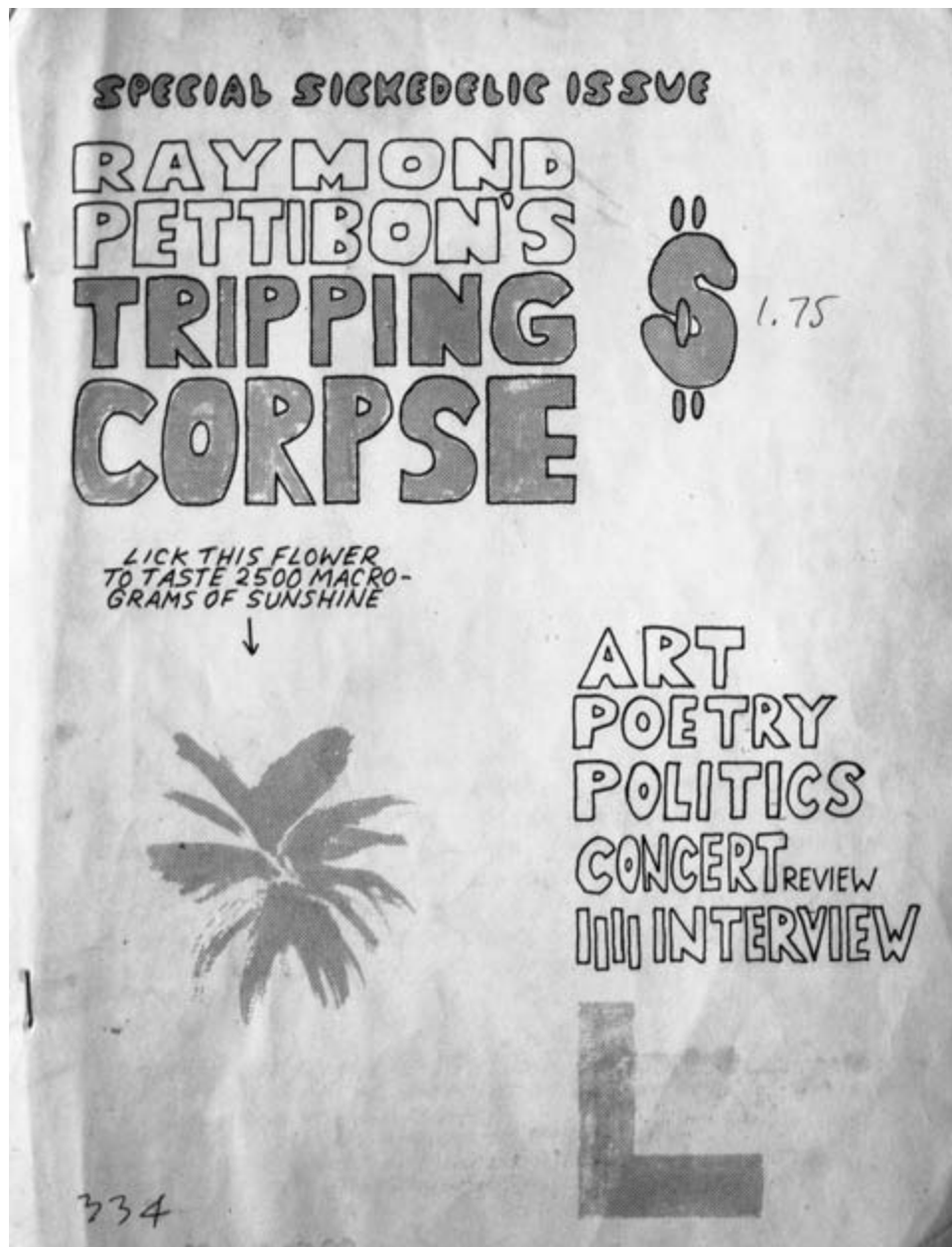
Pettibon's books, by contrast, are devoid of polemical commentary and any sense of fandom, and despite their harsh subject matter, they are relatively erudite, even poetic. They are decidedly art—and Pettibon conceived them as such. This, along with his clear ambivalence about the subculture, virtually precluded a punk audience—notwithstanding all the album covers and flyers based on his drawings. As the artist recalls,

I took an ad out in *Slash* magazine for my first book and I got one order. All the punk rockers I knew were intensely dismissive of anything to do with art. To them it was a four-letter word and it was only used in the context of something like “art fag” or “arty.” It was the worst insult you could give somebody. . . . The truth is, my work wasn't acknowledged as anything worthwhile to any degree by those people.⁵⁰

Pettibon's recollection is consistent with Kelley's aforementioned account, in which he holds punk responsible for transforming what had once been a collaborative Los Angeles art and music scene into one of rigid divisions and strict conformity.⁵¹

With *Captive Chains*, Pettibon established his penchant for dark, grotesque humor and his interest in youth subculture—though here the subculture he features is certainly not his own. Nonetheless, parallels can be drawn between his outdated characters and his own punk peers. By portraying the mindless vagaries of 1950s greasers, Pettibon emphasizes the lineage of postwar subculture, basically historicizing his own scene, which conversely saw itself as something novel. This implicit critique of current youth subculture via already obsolete precursors quickly became a primary Pettibon tactic.

Following *Captive Chains*, Pettibon exchanged the comic-book design for the low-budget, self-produced zine format: photocopied drawings and texts on sheets of 8½×11-inch paper, hand-stapled and sold for a dollar or two. Yet Pettibon's zines routinely defy the punk ethic from which they derive. Subtitled *Special Sickedelic Issue* and replete with a faux tab of acid, the front cover of his second book, *Trip-ping Corpse* (1981; fig. 3.5), openly proclaims its focus on hippie counterculture—a primary punk taboo. Virtually all of the images in this zine make reference to the



35.

Raymond Pettibon,
No Title (Lick this
flower), *Tripping
Corpse*, cover,
1981. Courtesy Regen
Projects, Los Angeles
© Raymond Pettibon.

1960s. On the first inside page, Pettibon explains his motivation: “Why is Pettibon, who’s been associated with punk up until now, doing a magazine like this? In one word, money. M-O-N-E-Y. You see there are more hippies than punks. Indeed marijuana is the biggest cash crop in California, my home state, and as we all know, hippies like to look at drawings while they hallucinate.” Below this facetious explanation, Pettibon takes aim at zine culture itself: “In editing a fanzine it helps if one has: an irrational enthusiasm for the subject written about; an adolescent’s capricious temperament; and unyielding integrity (except in matters of selling copies, soliciting ads, and getting that first job in the industry.) [punctuation sic] It also helps a great deal if one is homosexual. Since none of these qualities apply to us, we all got drunk and faked it.”

Pettibon thus pokes fun at punk resolve—and the thinly veiled homoerotics of its scene—while repeatedly casting himself as a shameless poseur and sellout. He lists “ART” and “POETRY” in the front-cover table of contents, a deliberate embrace of the dreaded “art fag” label—an affront not only to punk in general but especially to hardcore, conceived in opposition to what was seen as excessive punk artiness.⁵² Meanwhile, Pettibon’s Black Flag “interview,” also advertised on the front cover, is a parody of those found in *Flipside*, composed of inane comments about cock size and surf waves. His “Slash-style review” is equally unsatisfying: “We were told by punks that we could sell more copies if we put Black Flag on the cover and did record reviews. . . . Records cost too much and are mostly no good nowadays anyway, so we didn’t do any of those reviews, but we hope you punks enjoy this concert review.” That “concert review,” of a fictitious band called the Crashers, consists simply of the following: “Somebody told me the singer, Null Vacant (ex-No Sutures), cut himself all over with a razor blade a la Darby, then spoiled it all by closing his wounds with crazy glue. Somebody should tell him that a true punk sniffs glue.”

That these satiric punk parodies are combined with repeated references to 60s-era hippies renders Pettibon’s critique all the more trenchant. What was implicit in *Captive Chains* became explicit and emphatic. The zine unequivocally binds the two subcultures together—a link that not only would have made punks recoil but undercut the integrity of the movement itself, implicitly deflating its overblown claims to originality and radical politics and its obsession with authenticity. Pettibon saw such politics as basically a diluted reiteration of 1960s counterculture rebellion and thus had little patience with punk’s hyperbolic rhetoric and militant posturing:

You know, at least in the ’60s there was a war going on. There were tens of thousands of your peers dying, and millions of Vietnamese, at least that was a real battle. I mean, what the fuck is a battle to punk rockers? Against long hair? Jesus. It’s a really decadent mockery, when you think of it. When I was a kid, I always thought that each American generation of boys gets to have its own war, I expected that. My father was a navigator in World War II when he was nineteen, and the ’60s generation, they were fighting as well. Even if you protested against the war, then you also had a price to pay. If punk is just an excess of hormones, fine. Confine it to the slam pit, or whatever. But to make it political—what does it manifest itself as? Bruised tattoos?⁵³

All in all, Pettibon saw both punks and hippies as walking cartoon characters, and he found it difficult not to lampoon their brazen sanctimoniousness. He also increasingly felt that, as he puts it, “you could say as much about the present by delving into the past.”⁵⁴

Tripping Corpse includes among its drawings a three-page “Psychedelic Translation of Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl*,” Pettibon’s remake of Ginsberg’s counterculture classic:

I saw the best minds of my generation turned on,
flying naked through colored streets looking for
a negro,
dusted hippies connecting with Hell’s Angels, cooking up
their works by solar power,

who, food stamp-fed, squatted in pads lit and warmed
by day-glo shirts and Mohammed's toke,
who saw Blake in the Safeway, but lost him in the fruit section,
who dynamited universities while smoking SE Asian weed . . .

This preamble is littered with allusions to botched idealism and counterculture hypocrisy—to commercialization and misguided militancy, the bloodshed at Altamont and the turn to hard-core drugs (“cooked” with solar power, of course)—and the verses that follow only get increasingly bitter.⁵⁵ The 60s “revolutionary” was, in Pettibon’s view, a middle-class Ivy League college kid with too much time on his hands and a license to indulge in meaningless sex, recreational drugs, and adolescent rebellion. As Robert Storr puts it, “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.”⁵⁶

The countless youths that populate this zine and those that follow it are likewise portrayed as foolish and frivolous, their delusional faith in subcultural slogans as dangerous, if not deadly. In one exemplary page from *Tripping Corpse* (fig. 3.6), a naked girl covered in flower-power patterns plunges from a high-rise, a dopey mix of ecstasy and oblivion on her face. On the way down, she passes a workman painting “TURN ON TUNE IN DROP OUT” in psychedelic-style lettering on the wall. This suicidal hippie dimwit seems to have taken the last part of Timothy Leary’s dictum a bit too literally. The cover of Pettibon’s 1984 *Tripping Corpse Four* features the knife-wielding bohemian discussed here in the introduction (fig. 0.2). That zine then concludes with a seminude woman hanging from a noose, “LOVE” and a peace symbol tattooed to her body. “Took LSD for the first time,” reads the caption—a snide critique of both 60s superficiality and the exaggerated dangers of sex and drugs. In the 1990 *Tripping Corpse Twelve*, 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 counterculture classic.⁵⁷ By recontextualizing that song’s hopeful celebration of changing ideals—surely this was not what Dylan meant when he warned parents that “your sons and your daughters are beyond your command”—Pettibon transforms it into a scathing satire on how quickly those ideals soured.

It is important, however, not to see these works 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.”⁵⁸ Pettibon’s drawings do fulfill the most extreme prophecies of anti-60s alarmists—those who see it as the dawn of an ongoing age of apathy, excess, and amorality—yet such prophecies appear no less preposterous than the utopian fantasies they counteract. In a drawing from *Exterminating the Eagles* (1985), a middle-aged man sits in his underwear beside a gun. “I’M GOING TO MAKE JANE FONDA RECITE THE PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE,” he explains, an allusion to the actress’s heavily criticized visit to Hanoi in 1972, during which she made procommunist statements and was photographed atop a North Vietnamese anti-aircraft gun. The work sidesteps the issue of Fonda’s supposed act of treason, instead spotlight-



36.
Raymond Pettibon, No
Title (Turn on tune),
Tripping Corpse, p. 3,
1981. Courtesy Regen
Projects, Los Angeles
© Raymond Pettibon.

ing the ongoing right-wing obsession with it more than a decade later. In this and numerous other drawings, Pettibon's primary target is not the counterculture per se but baby boomers who either idealize or vilify "the 60s" in the 1980s, as well as fresh generations of young people whose romantic conceptions of the era are by-products of enduring pop-culture mythologies.

The subject of Bob Dylan was particularly resonant at a time when disenchantment with 60s ideals was fueled by a rise of American conservatism, and Pettibon has returned to him regularly. An untitled drawing from 1982 depicts a silhouette of

Dylan with a halo around his head. “OF COURSE HE BECAME A CHRISTIAN,” the caption sardonically comments, referring to the improbable conversion of the Jewish 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, antidrug, antiadultery, antipornography evangelical sermon—are among the most astounding ironies of the post-60s era.⁵⁹ Portraying that conversion as inevitable rather than incongruous, however, Pettibon wryly suggests that it was not so ironic after all, that the counterculture was not unlike organized religion, centered as it was on blind faith and icons such as Dylan—here appropriately haloed. In an untitled drawing from 1985, an aging hippie 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.” These drawings are aimed not at the treacherous conservatism of former radicals but at the obsolete leftism of those bent on perpetuating “60s” values. Preserving “the old Bob Dylan” thus necessitates killing off the real one.

As will be discussed at length in chapter 6, the main focus of such works is the youth-based (and music-based) subculture itself, its ideological conformity under the guise of self-styled radicalism. To Pettibon, the punk scene of which he himself was a part was less something fundamentally new than a case of history repeating itself—a revival of the very idealism that punks claimed to disdain. Popular music was especially significant because of its sociological connotations, its initial politicization in the 1960s, and the various attempts to repoliticize it in the decades that followed. In the late 1970s and 1980s, new trends—not only punk but also heavy metal and hip-hop—became fodder for fresh debates about music and music subculture. To fans, such music was a refreshingly provocative alternative to the perceived vapidness of current pop. Detractors meanwhile reverted to the kind of standard denunciations that had been recycled by conservatives since the 1950s. In 1985 the United States Senate held hearings on the degenerative state of popular music, a response to the lobbying efforts of Tipper Gore’s Parents’ Music Resource Center (PMRC), which drew support from both the religious Right and the politically correct Left.⁶⁰ In his 1987 best seller *The Closing of the American Mind*, Allan Bloom chastised liberals who countered such admonitions with uncritical appraisals. Describing popular music as “junk food for the soul,” he saw it as a primary cause of America’s cultural decline and blamed 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.”⁶¹

Pettibon’s work, in contrast, diminishes hyperbolized appraisals of popular music—whether from the Right or the Left. He draws attention to the conformist, commercial, and ultimately conservative underpinnings of “anti-institutional” youth-based subcultures past and present. In an untitled drawing from 1985, a 50s-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,” the son responds, “THE HAIR CAME WITH THE GUITAR, ALL THE WAY FROM HOLLYWOOD, CALIFORNIA. AND YOU CAN’T PLAY ONE WITHOUT THE OTHER.” Satirizing

the codification of rock and roll into a prepackaged 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. Apparently rock's standard uniform of rebelliousness—long hair and a guitar—can now be mail-ordered by adolescents everywhere.

When Pettibon's drawings imply that popular music is something more than plain fashion, it is never in the ways envisioned by its musicians and fans. On another page from the first *Tripping Corpse*, "HELTER SKELTER" is emblazoned across the page in large dripping letters, an allusion to the cryptic, blood-scrawled words left on the walls of the Manson Family's victims' homes, and to the 1968 Beatles song that, according to Charles Manson, prophesied Armageddon and justified his own killings.⁶² A hippie gone haywire, the cult leader 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. Manson was especially appealing to Pettibon because he represents an extreme example of the exaggerated significance placed upon popular music—and the potential pitfalls of subcultural faith—and Pettibon has used him as a demythologizing agent ever since. Such works spotlight a fanatical, murderous manifestation of artistic rebellion, and in fact Manson has been understood as a symbol not only of counter-culture demise but of the more general dangers of idealized deviance.⁶³ Yet Pettibon's deadpan caption at the bottom of the *Tripping Corpse* page preempts recourse to the opposite extreme: "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." The overtly lame logic of this caption deflates the reactionary condemnation of popular music (often by people who, paradoxically enough, also support gun rights), rendering it a no less naive exaggeration of music's role as a politically radical force.

To Pettibon, hippies and punks are complementary, and by the mid-1980s the links between them had become a central theme of his work. In another untitled drawing from 1985, a bearded longhair appears like an apparition before a shirtless punk who has scrawled "HELTER SKELTER" on the wall. The hippie has apparently come back 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." Pettibon presents the 60s counterculture as the progenitor of punk, which in turn is depicted as a mindless rehashing of hippie lunacy.

All of Pettibon's early zines upend punk conventions in one way or another, culminating in the 1985 *New Wavy Gravy* 2, his most explicit punk-zine parody. It includes a typed discussion much like the "interview" found in *Tripping Corpse*, but here the participants ruminate on the definitively unpunk topics of Bruce Springsteen and making out with girls, and their silly pseudonyms—Heinie Groza, Herb Pipgrass, Candy Barr, Suds, Dement, Phlegm—are direct jabs at the irreverent nicknames so often adopted by punk personalities. The zine also features an asinine dialogue titled "Punkers Philosophize" and a conversation with the SST band the Minutemen, in which the members discuss their politics:

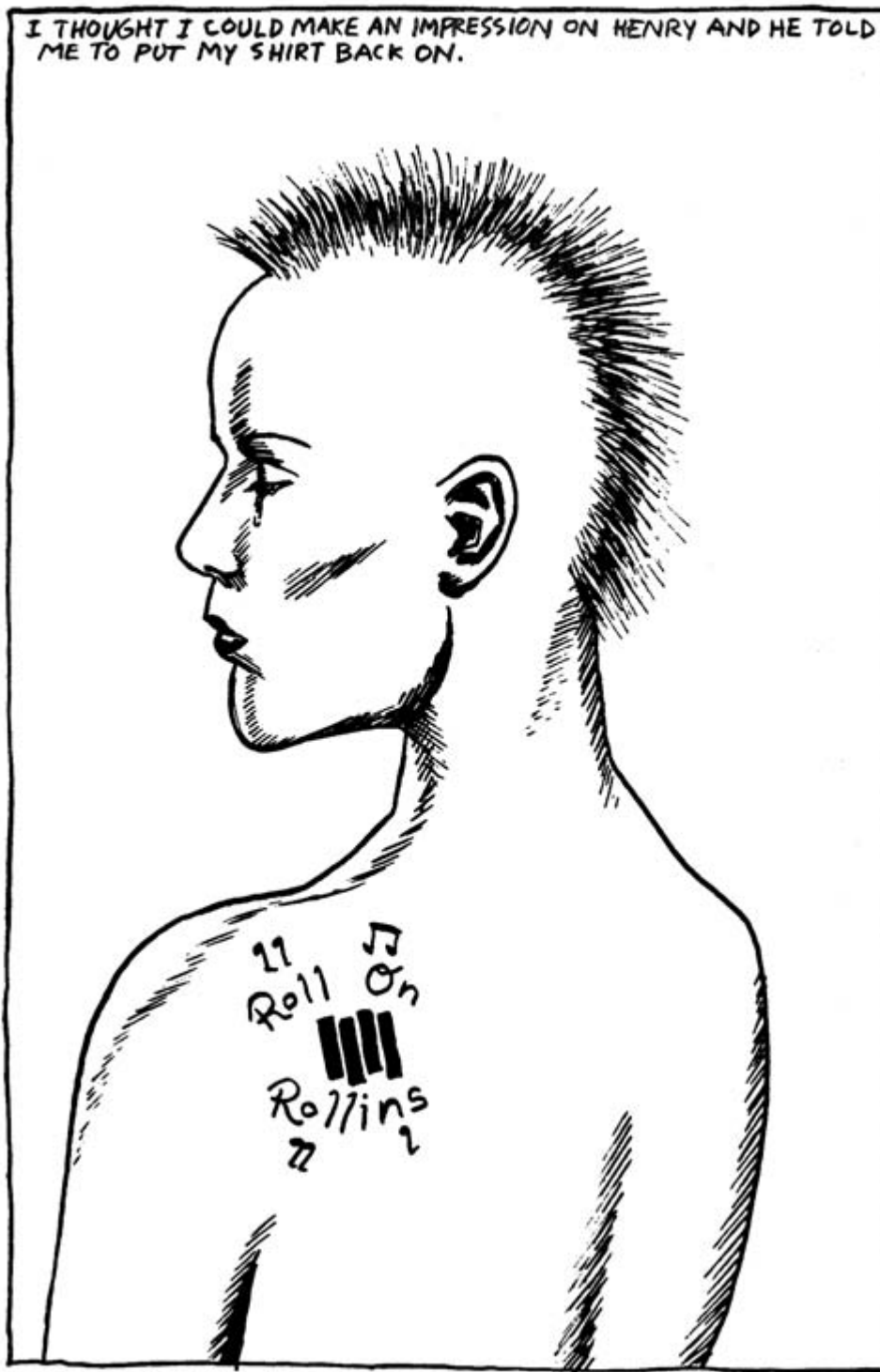
Q:....One thing I like about you guys is that you seem to have it together politically. First question: How would you classify yourselves politically?

M: ...Social Democrat. Like in Europe, where all the good bands are.
 Q:....What does that mean, that you can, say, have a few drinks and talk good politics with your friends, instead of just working the precinct constantly?
 M: ...No . . . Partying all the time, passing the pipe around, making out with chicks . . .
 Q:....Would you rather play schools or factories?
 G:....That depends. We wouldn't cross no picket lines, and of course, we wouldn't play no armaments factory.
 D:....Some junior high school girls are too immature.
 Q:....Would you ever consider running for public office?
 M: ...I think it's premature to talk about *that*.
 Q:....What if you were getting 3 or 4 encores every night?
 G:....No.
 M: ...Maybe.

Unlike *Tripping Corpse*, however, the images in *New Wavy Gravy 2* take aim directly at hardcore, and specifically at the fans of Black Flag, whose Pettibon-designed logo is tattooed to nearly every punk in the zine. On one androgynous figure, that logo appears with the slogan “Roll On Rollins,” a corny—and very unpunk—tribute to the band’s lead singer Henry Rollins (fig. 3.7). “I THOUGHT I COULD MAKE AN IMPRESSION ON HENRY,” the tearful adolescent laments, “AND HE TOLD ME TO PUT MY SHIRT BACK ON.” Highlighting the disjunction between fantasy and reality—a disparity central to the maintenance of celebrity in all its forms—Pettibon portrays punk as just another form of popular entertainment, its fans as followers with desires that will never be satisfied. The zine’s back cover openly ridicules the movement and its participants (fig. 3.8). Beneath a self-promotional tagline announcing “HEY, PUNKS! THIS IS THE BIG ONE! BUY A COPY AND HAVE A FRIEND READ IT TO YOU!,” two naked male Black Flag fans embrace, one holding out a bouquet, or more precisely, pulling it back. “I HATE FLOWERS, TOO,” he explains with pathetic transparency; “I BROUGHT THEM AS A JOKE.” This work, along with others in the zine, renders explicit the sexual dynamics alluded to on the first page of the earlier *Tripping Corpse*, unveiling the homoerotics of the punk scene, with its hero worship, embrace of androgyny, and slam-dancing pits of roiling, predominantly male bodies. Coupled with the boy’s anxious quote, it also points to the movement’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.

By the time of *New Wavy Gravy 2*, of course, punk was basically over—drained of its supposed subversiveness and thoroughly commercialized. Pettibon’s drawings thus take on a more general significance; they are again topical in their very atopicity. It is crucial that his subjects are obsolete, for the main focus of such work is youth subculture in general, its mix of capriciousness, sanctimoniousness, and ideological rigidity under the guise of radicalism. Like his use of hippies in the late 70s, his use of hardcore punks in the mid-80s functioned as a reminder of the too often overblown politicization and repoliticization of rock.

Similar lessons can be drawn from Pettibon’s intentionally irritating video *Sir Drone* (1989), which stars Mike Kelley and Minutemen bassist Mike Watt. Kelley and Pettibon met in 1985, when Kelley included him in *B and W*, a group exhibition he curated at the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art.⁶⁴ Kelley knew Pettibon’s drawings from the punk flyers he had seen around LA at the time, and the

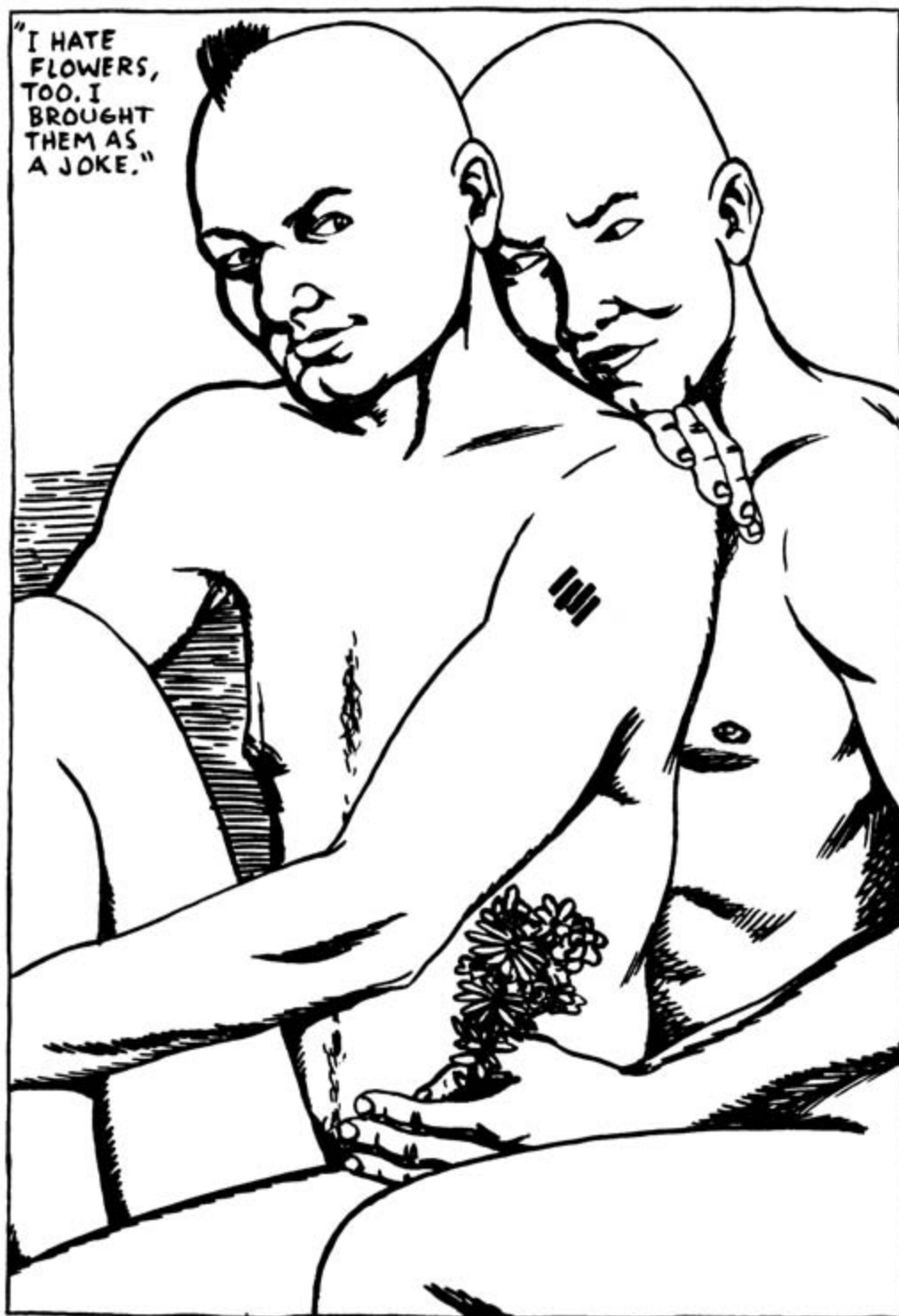


37.

Raymond Pettibon, No Title (I thought I), *New Wavy Gravy* 2, p. 10, 1985. Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles © Raymond Pettibon.

show was the first for Pettibon.⁶⁵ (McCarthy was also in the exhibition.) *Sir Drone* follows the moronic antics of Jinx (Kelley) and Dwayne (Watt) as they sit around in their underwear whining, bickering, and banging on guitars. They attempt to form a punk band, though they clearly have no musical abilities whatsoever, and their only concern is coming up with a hip name—The Abraham Lincoln Youth Brigade, The Consumers, The Glue-Sniffers, and The Men From Punkle being some

HEY, PUNKS! THIS IS THE BIG
ONE! BUY A COPY AND HAVE
A FRIEND READ IT TO YOU!



of the idiotic possibilities they entertain. 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?” asks Jinx, who is caught between two different forces of conformity: he doesn’t want to get a haircut because, as Dwayne explains, “his hippie mom won’t let him!” Oblivious to the similarities between punk subculture and the 60s movement they so despise, Jinx and Dwayne intend their music to be “political,” offering song lyrics such as these:

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!

The fact that they cannot really play their instruments apparently only enhances their authenticity. “I make up my own chords,” boasts Jinx. “I play real. I play myself.”

It is Pettibon’s books, however, that offer the richest refutation of punk realism, along with the broader fanzine tradition. If conventional zines combine direct polemics with a raw anti-aesthetic that connotes honesty and unalloyed grassroots integrity, Pettibon’s disrupt those very connotations, offering irony, insincerity, contradiction, and ambiguity, essentially driving a wedge between form and content. Whereas zines typically shore up subcultural identity and reinforce ideological community, Pettibon’s routinely portray such uniformity as myopic and delusional, if not completely blinding. More fundamentally, they impair the fanzine’s essential function: direct, transparent communication. Pettibon’s scenes are always out of context; captions clash with images rather than explain them; voices are unreliable, multiplied, and severed from their sources; meaning is riddled and left open-ended. To Pettibon, his work is political but devoid of ideological certainty and resistant to dogmatic implications: “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.”⁶⁶

Whereas Pettibon’s cartoonish style and mass media references belong to the lineage of pop, this complex interaction of the visual and the verbal resembles certain conceptual art practices, and though he was hardly versed in the terminology of the day, Pettibon’s play with transparency and authenticity relates to contemporaneous conceptualist discourse. Pettibon uses grotesque combinations of categories and the de- and re-contextualization of the familiar to destabilize meaning. Indeed, clear parallels can be drawn between the stripped-down language of zines (and of punk music) to which Pettibon responded, the photo/text conventions addressed by Kelley, and the notion of “performance as a concrete reality” complicated by McCarthy’s buffoonery. All three artists turned from a type of realism connoted by formal simplicity, directness, and anti-aesthetics to a strategy of multifarious, obviously concocted personas or “masks.” For each, this gambit was not just a means of portraying fictional characters but a way to deliberately elide any sense of personal expression and instead shift attention to the viewer’s own socially constructed values.

Not contained by speech bubbles or other ways of identifying who is saying what

3.8.

Raymond Pettibon, No Title (Hey, punks! This), *New Wavy Gravy 2*, back cover, 1985. Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles © Raymond Pettibon.

to whom, Pettibon's polyphone texts float, dislodged from the imagery on the page. Tenses change and voices shift from first to second to third person, often within the same drawing. As a result, one is rarely sure if a particular statement represents a protagonist's remark, his or her internal thoughts, an external journalistic comment, the remarks of an additional character outside the pictured scene, or the rumination of the artist himself. Pronouns are also detached from their antecedents, causing either the artist or the viewer to be implicated in morally ambiguous scenarios. This use of dangling pronouns—particularly “I,” “my,” “you,” and “they”—arguably constitutes the most troubling aspect of Pettibon's work, inducing, as Benjamin H. D. Buchloh puts it, “a discomforting fusion between the depicted subject, the speaking subject of the textual inscription, and . . . the reading subject.”⁶⁷ As an example, Buchloh cites an untitled drawing from 1985 in which Nancy Reagan looks down sternly at the viewer. The caption above her reads:

SEX WITH NANCY IS LIKE COPULATING WITH A WELL-TUNED, DELICATE MACHINE, AS IF SEX WERE MERELY A PART OF THE FORMAL ETIQUETTE OF A MARRIAGE. THAT'S HOW I IMAGINE IT WITH HER. SOMETIMES I IMAGINE HER LIKING IT, OTHER TIMES I FANTASIZE ABOUT OVERPOWERING HER.

Midparagraph, the statement shifts from third to first person, from a definitive remark presumably made by Nancy's husband Ronald to a speculative one relayed by some unnamed fantasist. Coupled to the towering face glaring directly out from the page, this text conflates reader/viewer and dubious speaker. The effect is at once funny, disorienting, and unnerving.

Pettibon's tactical entanglement of image and text is especially akin to Kelley's work around this same time. Indeed, Kelley remembers sensing an immediate affinity between Pettibon's art and his own, and that affinity was part of his impetus for including him in the *B and W* exhibition.⁶⁸ Like Kelley's birdhouses, *Poltergeist* series, and rambling performances, Pettibon's works combine the visual and the verbal in ways that complicate rather than elucidate meaning. Though Pettibon's images are not photographs, they are decidedly photographic and readymade-like—replete with stock character types and iconic celebrities, and set in highly cinematic scenes. He has himself referred to his drawings as “video stills,” having at times actually drawn from the television screen.⁶⁹ His works cause friction between such imagery and the graffitilike texts—often derived from pre-twentieth-century literature mentioned above—that push against that imagery.⁷⁰ Also similar to Kelley, Pettibon often transforms the lofty into the prosaic, and vice versa, by juxtaposing pseudometaphysical associations with the utterly mundane—superheroes, cartoon characters, surfers, trains. At times he features explicitly religious subjects, such as Bibles, priests, nuns, and the crucified Christ, accompanied by texts that are at times wantonly blasphemous, but more often pointedly vague and esoteric, parodying spiritualist speak itself. In an untitled drawing from 1987 (fig. 3.9), a giant JESUS SAVES sign lights up a city's night sky, while an abundance of elusive comments cascade down the page:

We are reduced to looking vaguely about at the sky.
SHE WOULDN'T BE AS SHE IS IF HE WEREN'T.
(PICKED UP OFF THE STREET AS SHE WAS.)
HER BEING AS SHE IS IS THE SIGN OF IT.



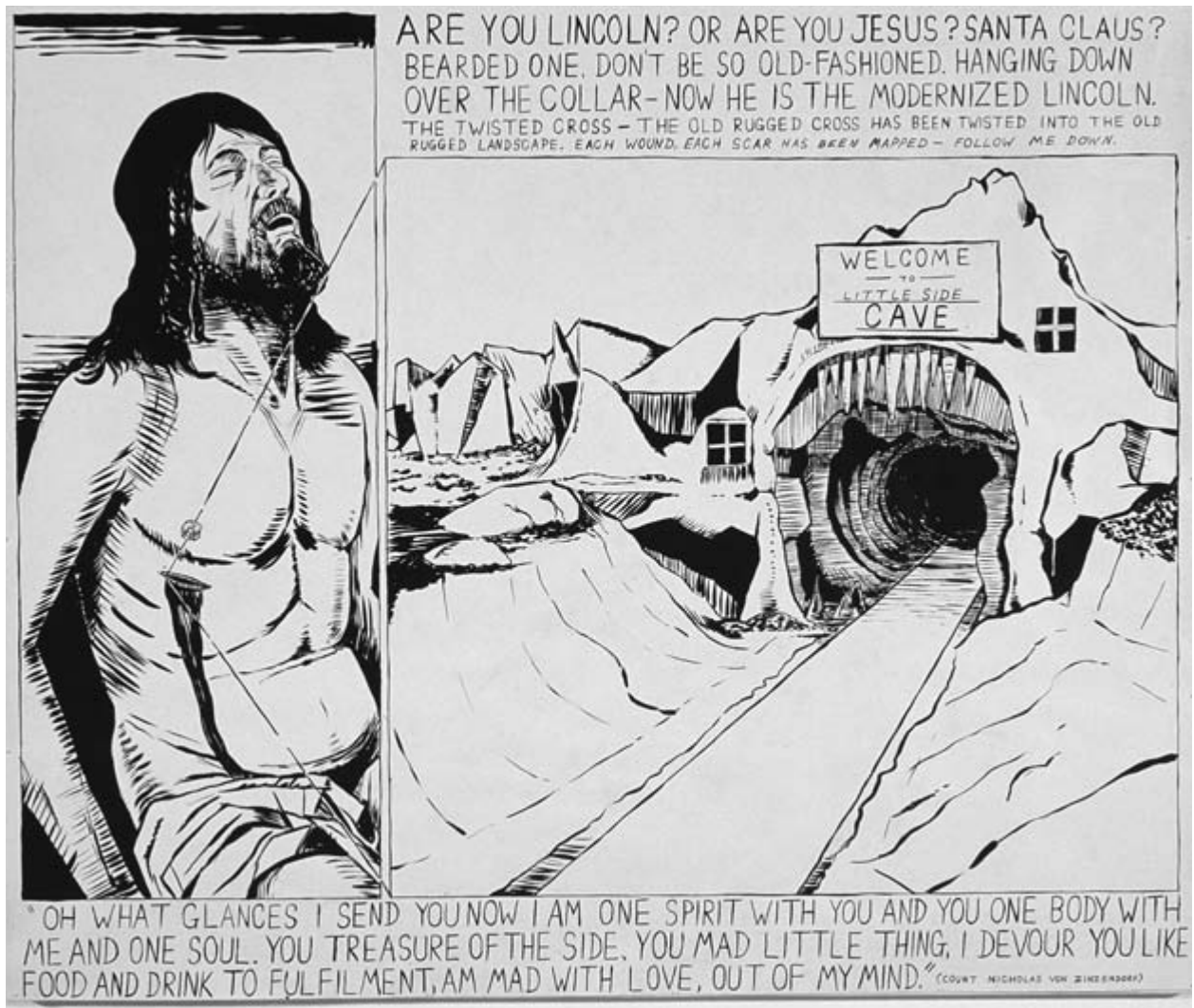
39.

Raymond Pettibon,
No Title (We are
reduced), 1987.
Courtesy Regen
Projects, Los Angeles
© Raymond Pettibon.

THE SENSE OF THAT WAS, NO DOUBT, IN MY NEXT WORDS.
WELL, THE WAY, SIMPLY, THAT THE SHOW FITS.
MAIN TO BROADWAY TO OLIVE.
WHAT'S THAT ACRONYM?
AT LAST, THE MYSTIC RELATION BETWEEN MYSELF AND THE WORLD.
HIS NAME UP IN LIGHTS AS IT IS.

Like Kelley's faux-logical object descriptions and meandering lecture-performances, the associations on Pettibon's page are loosely connected and seemingly profound, and yet precise meaning cannot be fixed.

Kelley too has created an abundance of crude black-and-white drawings with disjointed captions, initiated in the 1979 *Poltergeist* project and produced consistently

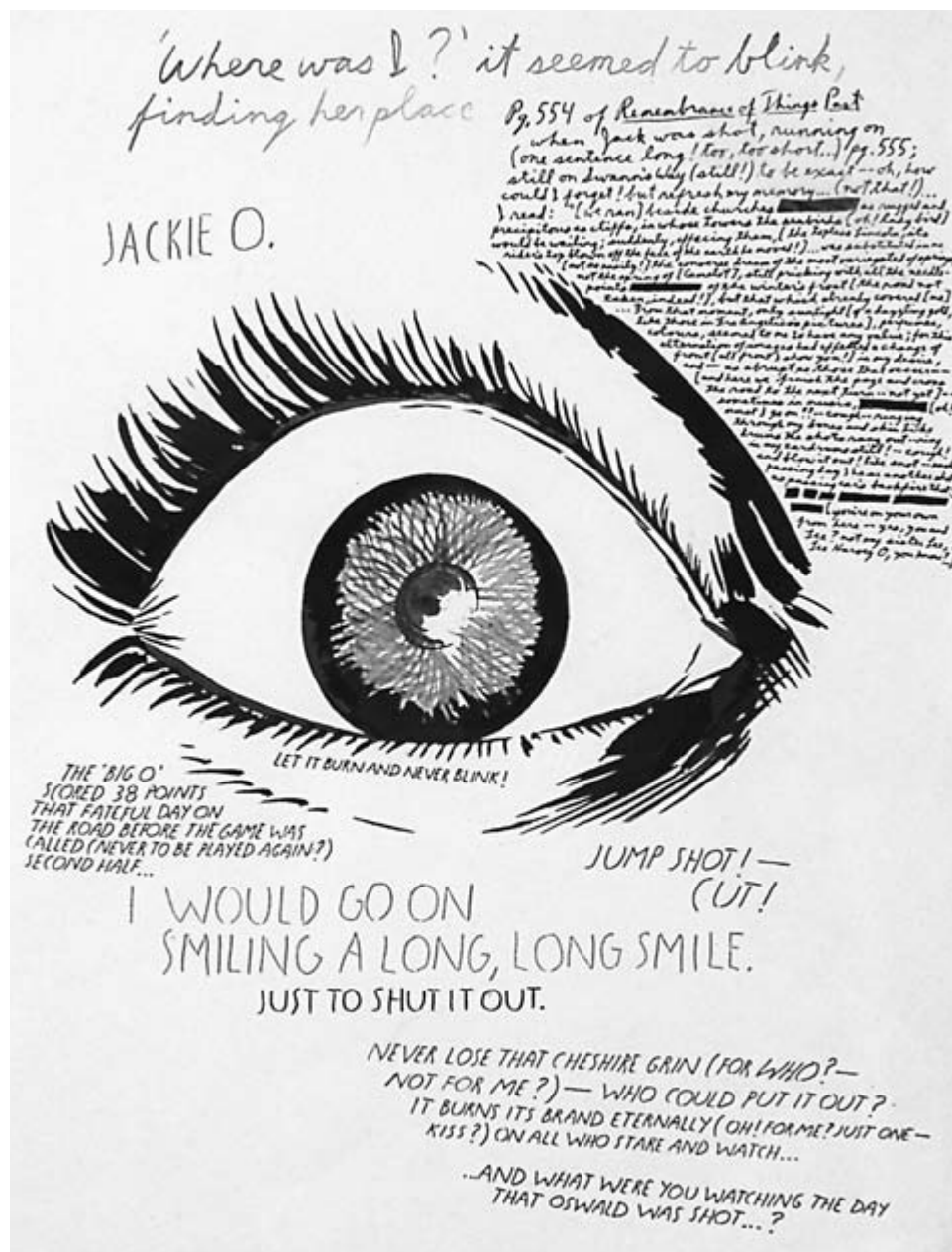


throughout the 1980s. *Little Side Cave #1* (1985; fig. 3.10), for example, consists of two pictorial sections—Christ in Deposition appropriated from a Renaissance-era painting; and an image of an amusement park ride called “Little Side Cave” tethered to the bloody wound in Christ’s torso—illuminated by the following texts, the last of which is a quotation from an obscure eighteenth-century Christian cult:⁷¹

ARE YOU LINCOLN? OR ARE YOU JESUS? STANTA CLAUS?
 BEARDED ONE, DON’T BE SO OLD-FASHIONED, HANGING DOWN OVER THE
 COLLAR—NOW HE IS THE MODERNIZED LINCOLN.
 THE TWISTED CROSS—THE OLD RUGGED CROSS HAS BEEN TWISTED INTO THE
 OLD RUGGED LANDSCAPE, EACH WOUND, EACH SCAR, HAS BEEN MAPPED—
 FOLLOW ME DOWN.
 “OH WHAT GLANCES I SEND YOU NOW I AM ONE SPIRIT WITH YOU AND YOU
 ONE BODY WITH ME AND ONE SOUL. YOU TREASURE OF THE SIDE. YOU MAD
 LITTLE THING, I DEVOUR YOU LIKE FOOD AND DRINK TO FULFILLMENT, AM
 MAD WITH LOVE, OUT OF MY MIND.” (COUNT NICHOLAS VON ZINZENDORF)

Typically, such works belong to Kelley’s successive theme-based series of objects, texts, and performances. (*Little Side Cave #1* is part of the multifaceted *Plato’s*

3.10.
 Mike Kelley, *Little
 Side Cave #1*, 1985.
 Courtesy Kelley
 Studio, Inc.



3.11.
Raymond Pettibon, No
Title (Where was I?),
1987. Courtesy Regen
Projects, Los Angeles
© Raymond Pettibon.

Cave, Rothko's Chapel, Lincoln's Profile.) Individually, however, they are strikingly similar to Pettibon's drawings in both form and content—each a loose network of eclectic references, cryptic associations, visual and verbal ambiguities, and destabilized meanings.

In the mid-1980s Pettibon began to increase the complexity of his word and image interplays. Though he continued to produce simple black-and-white drawings with pithy taglines, he filled other works with dense amalgamations of texts, short and long, each represented by a different handwriting or colored ink. This newer approach also brought together a wider range of literary styles—the blunt and the elaborate, the current and the antiquated, the prosaic and the poetic—and a host of regional accents and sentence structures, from southern twang to

upper-crust colloquialisms to sports lingo to anachronistic adolescent slang. In an untitled work from 1987 (fig. 3.11), a close-up of an open eye is surrounded by a plethora of disjointed expressions, including a long annotated passage from Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, references to Jackie O., Lee Harvey Oswald, and professional basketball, a brief line from Gabriele D'Annunzio's *The Flame of Life*, and other provocative phrases that may or may not be Pettibon's own.

Pettibon relies on the cultural significance of his depicted characters to fuel the grotesque contradictions at play in his work. Joining text and image and mixing multiple visual and verbal styles, he animates his protagonists by affixing evocative voices to them. At times those voices are convincing; at other times they are utterly implausible; most often they are somewhere in between. He not only deconstructs conventional meanings but constructs new—albeit often highly ambiguous and ambivalent—meanings. In all instances, the “performance” of the persona is obscured or complicated and expectations are upended. Provoked and often even moved by Pettibon's work, one must confront the slipperiness of its suggested meanings and the unreliability of both the artist and the supposed speaker. His drawings are at once opened up and completed by the rich associations elicited by their components and the friction between them. The goal is to not only activate the viewer's role as interpreter but also foster reflection upon his or her own beliefs, values, and presumptions along the way. “Punk rockers used to say, ‘Well, we want you to think,’” Pettibon muses. “Yeah, that's fine. But . . . actually *do* that, rather than just put it out there like some slogan.”⁷²

FOUR

BENDING GENDER

Kelley's 1987 assemblage *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid* (plate 10) is a tapestry of tattered toys, handmade rag dolls, puppets, knitted potholders, and stuffed animals sewn onto a matrix of afghan blankets mounted on canvas. The chaotic conglomeration of smiling faces and snuggly bodies offers a perverse surfeit of sapiness, a discomfiting sense of homeyness gone haywire. The work highlights the economics of gift giving, in which pieces of thread and fabric are invested with deep emotional content—affection, adoration, sympathy, appreciation—to be passed on to friends, family members, and acquaintances, who are then indebted to return the favor. Offering too much sentimentality for one person to take, certainly more than can ever be repaid, Kelley's heap of discarded craft items underscores the ubiquity of that system and the underlying social dynamics that sustain it.

With its allover composition, swirling shapes, and mural size, this assemblage also brings to mind Jackson Pollock's drip paintings, a very different order of handiwork.¹ In *More Love Hours*, however, expressive "gestures" are formed not by paint but via the interwoven skeins of yarn, patterned cloth, and cushiony lumps of stuffed-animal flesh. Its coordinated colors and designs are nevertheless painterly, an approach not unfamiliar to Kelley, whose early art education involved, as mentioned in chapter 2, heavy doses of abstract expressionism. A conflation of canonical modernism and homespun knickknack, the work is a blatant violation not only of the distinctions between high art and kitsch but of the gender codes affixed to such classifications. This compendium of patently "feminine" materials and techniques—macramé, crochet, knitting, sewing, needlepoint—appears incompatible not only with Kelley's own sex but with the machismo of the New York School in general, and of Pollock in particular.² Indeed, Pollock has long been mythologized as a paint-slinging cowboy-artist, his sweeping swirls understood in distinctly masculine terms, from heroic individualism and violent aggression to territorial urination and "manly ejaculatory splat."³ *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid* plays off this mythology, forcing a clash of "womanly" sensitivity and supposedly virile expressiveness.

Yet, as June Wayne argued in the early 1970s, Western culture has long conceived of "the male artist as a stereotypical female," innately emotional, instinctual, irrational, and strange, possessed by mysterious forces of creation. Whereas women have been subjugated by such a characterization, men have benefited from its miraculous overtones while camouflaging their "quasi-female" identities in overt masculinity.⁴ This trope is again epitomized by Pollock, purveyor of both raw emotion and rough-and-tumble machismo.⁵ If Pollock represents a safe co-optation of the feminine, Kelley offers an awkward mixture of genders—funny, discomfiting, grotesque. By awkwardly appropriating actual "women's work" rather than

just absorbing its mythologized qualities, he effaces the macho abstract expressionist facade, exposing the ordinarily sublimated “femininity” of the manly artist.

Kelley’s tapestry is also in dialogue with feminism itself, and particularly with women artists of the 1970s who employed traditionally feminine materials and techniques to celebrate female experiences and to resist patriarchal standards. Because he is a man, *More Love Hours* poses a direct challenge to that strategy. However, the work is not simply an inversion of gender norms, though it has been treated that way by certain critics who have taken issue with Kelley’s practice. In a 1994 essay, for example, Mira Schor referred to *More Love Hours* as “casual sexism,” denouncing Kelley for “ripping off feminist art and artists.”⁶ A year later, Faith Wilding characterized his craft works as “a mere reversal of gender signifiers” that does more to reaffirm his masculinity and his mastery of “the feminine” than to disrupt gender stereotypes.⁷ These criticisms overlook the exaggerated, grotesque nature of Kelley’s manipulations, the fact that his work actually caricaturizes the male artist who ordinarily co-opts femininity with impunity. *More Love Hours* is directed less at feminism per se than at high-art ideals, and the myths of masculine genius that both enable and are enabled by them.

Thus Kelley’s tapestry can be positioned against the resurgence of machismo in 1980s art, most notably in conjunction with the rise of neo-expressionism. Artists such as Julian Schnabel envisioned themselves as the “new Pollocks,” and their revival of large-scale gestural painting triggered a return to the manly rhetoric and heroic personas of postwar American art.⁸ Credited with a revival of authentic and sincere emotion, sensitivity, and expressiveness, these artists genuinely recuperated the myth of the male artist as feminine stereotype. Kelley, by contrast, publicly emasculates himself, fashioning a “new Pollock” of a very different kind—wholly insincere and inauthentic.

The range of contradictory forces that collide in Kelley’s ridiculous tapestry highlights the profound uncertainty that characterized American gender politics of the 1980s, when the “second-wave” feminism of the 1960s and 1970s came under heavy fire from both advocates of women’s rights and their detractors. The former called for more dialectical approaches to fighting patriarchy, arguing that previous tactics relied too heavily on essentialist notions of gender and therefore risked reinscribing the very stereotypes they resisted. The latter blamed the women’s movement for disrupting the “natural” structure of the family unit, calling for a return to prefeminist roles and standards—part of the more general neoconservative repudiation of “60s” liberalism. Such an attitude fueled the rollbacks and rallying cries of the Reagan Right, for whom the Gipper was a tough, two-fisted paragon of masculinity.⁹ Striking numerous targets at once, Kelley’s work reflects the complexity of this moment, not only acknowledging its paradoxical gender politics but embracing that paradox as the centerpiece of an alternative approach when others seemed to have stalled.

By the time of Kelley’s tapestry, McCarthy and Pettibon had already been producing work that problematized entrenched gender terminology. Since the mid-1970s, McCarthy had been regularly using cross-dressing and role playing to expose contradictions very similar to those unveiled by Kelley; from his earliest zine, Pettibon had been recasting nostalgic models in ways that compromise their standing as ideal representations of femininity and masculinity.

These artists' sustained treatment of the chaotic and incongruous nature of "gender" demonstrates the ways in which Kelley, McCarthy, and Pettibon have continued to mobilize the formal and conceptual tactics developed early in their careers. All three confront New Left discourses through stale mid-twentieth-century mythologies—obviously outdated, but nonetheless enduring, even resurgent. The problem of gender classification is but one poignant example of contemporary America's contradictory cultural politics. Yet that problem also had special relevance to these artists, due not only to their generational moment but also to their specific formative experiences in the 1970s. As discussed, both Kelley and McCarthy passed from relatively conservative early milieus to a Southern California context indelibly marked by radical feminist art and activism. Pettibon, by contrast, was immersed in a subcultural scene whose gender politics he considered to be reactionary, if not outright misogynist. For all three, questions of gender were particularly palpable and provocative. Such questions were further amplified by these artists' own complicated status as white males sensitive to gender prejudice but generally suspicious of doctrinaire positions.

In response, Kelley, McCarthy, and Pettibon offer works of art composed of conflicting codes and signals, smashed together in ways that magnify their incoherence. Their orchestrated collisions represent not simply a negation of obsolete categories but a way to capture the true messiness—the fundamental, baffling madness—of contemporary identity and its vicissitude. (Categorization, their work implies, is merely a contrived way of managing this mess.) Their confrontations resist gender-based theorization, just as they refuse to assert a singular voice or viewpoint. Though certainly influenced by previous artists, and by feminism overall, their work is distinct in its nonpolemical strategy and willfully confounding effects. Poking fun in many directions at once, it is less focused on engaging contemporary gender debates than on highlighting their dubiousness in the first place. Kelley, McCarthy, and Pettibon portray gender as continuously mobile, culturally conditioned, and artificially confined by notions of the natural and the normal. Moreover, reflecting their expansive approach to the irrationality of gender overall, they consistently engage masculinity as a problematic category in and of itself.

The contention that masculinity is an appropriate subject of progressive thought remains debated. Such efforts can be seen as a shrouded form of antifeminism, an attempt to evade the more pressing and detrimental problem of female subjugation. (The difficulty of navigating this terrain may partly explain why the gender issues at play in the work of Kelley, McCarthy, and Pettibon have not been given the in-depth treatment the topic deserves.)¹⁰ In the 1960s and 70s, male feminism was largely seen as a contradiction in terms, since all men benefit from patriarchal culture and institutions, willfully or not.¹¹ In the late 1980s and 1990s, however, this dismissal was increasingly contested, as evidenced by a surge of writings on the question of men "doing" feminism, as well as on masculinity itself.¹² In "How Feminism Made a Man Out of Me: The Proper Subject of Feminism and the Problem of Men" (1998), for example, Patrick D. Hopkins questions feminism's monolithic notion of masculinity as "an inevitable possession and consequence of being male."¹³ Such recent reassessments stand in marked contrast to the hesitancy of previous writers to approach the subject critically. Feminist-inclined men had mainly relegated themselves to supporting roles.¹⁴ The larger problem, which

came to a head at this time, was that in the wake of 1970s feminism, men were confronted with a dearth of clear-cut role models. While some attempted to “solve” the dilemma by demonizing “women’s lib” and returning to prefeminist paradigms, others advanced a new and improved male, emancipated from what they saw as reverse sexism perpetrated by the women’s movement. This latter line of thought inspired the mythopoeic “men’s movement,” which blossomed in America in the mid-1980s and flowered in the early 1990s. Self-help books, men’s rights groups, and male-bonding retreats encouraged men to redefine their own potentials, just as women did during the previous two decades. At their best, such entities sought to help an unsure population negotiate the new roles expected of it by a more egalitarian society. Most often, however, they cast men as the victims of feminist oppression and called for a reification of traditional values as a way to resist feminist “conspiracies.”¹⁵

For those legitimately enlightened by feminism, the situation was more complicated. Such men were faced with the predicament of resisting a system from which they themselves unavoidably profited. In an essay titled “Male Feminism as Oxymoron”—published in the same 1998 volume as Hopkins’s essay—David J. Kahane recognizes the “anguished consciousness” of antisexist men, acknowledging that they are delusional if they think that they can fully comprehend feminism, let alone avoid being part of the problem. Such men must, he argues, accept the contradictory nature of their own positions—the fact that “fighting patriarchy . . . means fighting themselves.” Kahane denounces a range of profeminist male “types,” including those who advance a critique of masculinity without conceding that the social restrictions placed on women will always be more damaging than those placed on men. He calls for an openly self-critical approach, one that operates with an awareness of its oxymoronic status, of the shortcomings of its own endeavor.¹⁶

Kahane’s argument resonates in Kelley’s, McCarthy’s, and Pettibon’s work, which confronts restrictive standards of masculinity but does not characterize those restrictions as equal to those of femininity. Their focus on masculinity serves as a way into the debate, a way to engage the problem while avoiding the pitfalls of previous approaches, progressive and reactionary. Acknowledging their own contradictory positions, they make no attempt to resolve the issues they raise but rather aim to heighten their very irresolvability, to accentuate the intractability of patriarchal power even as they undermine it. Through incongruous forms—hermaphroditized, androgynized, pumped up, or neutered—they critique an oppressive patriarchal society sustained by men’s expectations both of themselves and of women. Arguably, their work is about the impossibility of “male feminism” as much as it is a refusal to accept that men can contribute nothing to the cause.

MEAT CAKES: MCCARTHY’S PUNCH-DRUNK HUNK AND HALF-DONE-UP DRAG QUEENS

Alongside the rich presence of feminist art in the Los Angeles area, a number of male Southern California artists were putting masculinity in play in the 1970s.¹⁷ Richard Newton, for example, was testing out sex roles and identity through a series of cross-dressing performances, and by the end of the decade he had begun to focus on explicitly “masculine” subjects such as baseball and car culture.¹⁸ For Paul



4.1.
Paul McCarthy,
*Whipping a Wall with
Paint*, 1974. Courtesy
the artist and Hauser
& Wirth.

Best's 1978 *Octavia* series, the artist walked the streets of San Diego alternately dressed in "masculine" and "feminine" clothing, gauging the effects of gender stereotypes on both men and women. That same year John Duncan performed *Every Woman*, for which he hitchhiked a section of LA's Santa Monica boulevard known for male prostitution. Duncan's objective was to experience the typically female fear of male sexual aggression. McCarthy served as his cameraman, and the two artists later appeared before an audience to discuss the work's implications.¹⁹

In his own contemporaneous videos and performances, McCarthy exploded popular clichés of masculinity by forcibly feminizing them on the one hand and blowing them out of proportion on the other. The earliest of these engage overly gendered art techniques and styles, specifically the presumed machismo of abstract expressionism. In a 1974 video titled *Penis Dip Painting*, McCarthy dips his penis into a can of black house paint and "paints" with it on a sheet of clear glass, parodying Pollock's filmed glass paintings from the early 1950s. McCarthy at once overliteralizes his predecessor's mythologized masculinity to the point of satire and undermines it through the obvious insufficiency of both the painting and the artist's flaccid "brush." Similar effects are produced by the 1974 *Whipping a Wall and Window with Paint* (fig. 4.1), in which the shirtless, unshaven artist facetiously performs a public "action painting" by immersing a blanket in house paint and methodically beating it against the walls and windows of a storefront. McCarthy struggles to achieve the requisite splatters and gestures, needing to swing his heavy, paint-soaked cloth around several times to gain enough momentum. His grunting and heavy breathing reveal how exhausting this process is. Whereas *Penis Dip Painting* is a feeble rendition, *Whipping a Wall* is over the top. Both foreground the hyperbolic gendering of Pollock's drips and splatters.

More typically, McCarthy's 1970s works feature hybrids of masculinity and femininity, more balanced gender blends that refuse to coalesce. In a 1975 performance, *Experimental Dancer—Rumpus Room*, for example, he appears naked, shaved,

and wearing a dopey rubber mask while playfully prancing around a 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 sound track. The result is a disturbingly epicene character whose androgyny is shown to be nothing more than a crude deception. McCarthy repeatedly “fingers” his ersatz vagina only to then turn around and reveal his hidden penis.²⁰ Neither gender is permitted to take hold, for each time femaleness is intimated, it is quickly denied by an overt reference to actual maleness—and vice versa.

Around this time the trend in women’s art in the Los Angeles area, as elsewhere, ran to what Lucy Lippard called the “unashamedly feminine.” Whereas in the 1950s and 60s female artists had generally sought to avoid the label, now “delicate touch, pale colors, and gyno-sensuous imagery [were] frankly associated with femaleness (by the artists themselves rather than by a patronizing reviewer deigning to cover ‘minor’ art).”²¹ The Feminist Art Program with which McCarthy had direct contact in the early 70s was a hotbed for this approach. FAP artists critiqued the domestic roles and “feminine” identities assigned to middle-class women.²² Along with traditional “women’s work”—sewing, cleaning, cooking—they used role playing and costume to examine the social restrictions placed upon women: in the 1971 performance *Three Women*, artists used dress-up as a way to experience the psyches of three female types—the hippie, the prostitute, and the mother;²³ in 1970 Nancy Youdelman produced a series of photographs featuring models dressed up in standard feminine period costumes, drawing attention to conventions of femininity and the objectification and sexualization of women in patriarchal society; in *Cunt Cheerleaders* (1970–71) and *Cock and Cunt Play* (1970), FAP artists performed acerbic caricatures of conventional gender norms. Numerous feminist artists from this period offered likeminded challenges, either precisely reenacting, and thus reclaiming, conventional feminine personas or exaggerating and lampooning deep-seated stereotypes.

In a series of mid-70s videos and performances likewise set in “feminine” domestic spaces—bedrooms, bathrooms, kitchens—McCarthy also used role playing and costume. Cross-dressing became his principal tactic for dislocating the social codes by which gender identity is typically communicated. In his 1975 video *Sailor’s Meat* (fig. 1.3), McCarthy’s character continually swings between masculinity and femininity. From the start, the caked-on makeup and blond wig cast this shady character as an obvious perversion of standard pinup images. (As will be discussed in chapter 5, the work is actually a parody of Russ Meyer’s 1963 soft-porn film *Europe in the Raw*.) The artist slips into various items of lacy black 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 voyeuristic viewer is privy to the dressing of a drag queen, yet this is a type of drag in which, as in *Experimental Dancer*, the protagonist’s maleness remains obvious, only barely veiled. Throughout the work he accentuates the fakeness of his “feminine” guise by continuously drawing attention either to the insufficiency of his costume or to his actual penis. *Sailor’s Meat* represents a clumsy layering of gender rather than a covering of one with the other. McCarthy’s strategy is not just inversion or exchange of types—penis for vagina, masculine for feminine—but an obfuscation

of identity achieved through mixing, slippage, doubling, and confusion. Indeed, the title itself has a double meaning, meat being a euphemism for both male and female genitalia.

Such works are certainly indebted to feminism, and especially the Feminist Art Program. As mentioned in chapter 1, McCarthy attended FAP performances at Cal Arts in the early 1970s, having been personally invited by the program's founder, Judy Chicago. His subsequent embrace of explicit bodily imagery, role playing, graphic sexuality, and satiric humor can be firmly linked to the tactics used by FAP artists. Yet McCarthy's work also diverges from that of his predecessors, not only due to the obvious fact that the artist is now male but because he routinely emphasizes that maleness through the transparent artificiality of his transvestite getup. The amplified inadequacy of his unabashedly pathetic masquerade renders the performance satirical, and also farcical, preempting any suggestion of authenticity or a concrete message. Unlike the FAP's activities, works such as *Sailor's Meat* are seemingly devoid of personal expression and preestablished political objectives.

Like Kelley's tapestry, McCarthy's cross-dressing videos and performances are less about exploring fixed gender identities than about underscoring—and enacting—the chaotic forces that both generate and defy such identities. He essentially extends his “making car crashes” methodology to the subject of gender and its cultural construction. The behaviors exhibited by McCarthy's characters are so utterly ridiculous that rational motives and intentions—of the artist and of his protagonists—are virtually inconceivable. The befuddling, grotesquely humorous effects of *Sailor's Meat* are akin to those of *Political Disturbance*, performed the following year before an appropriately appalled upscale hotel audience. *Sailor's Meat* similarly involves a communication breakdown, a “gender disturbance,” in which the conspicuous lack of clear meaning is actually more unsettling than the transgressive acts themselves. In fact, those acts were rather mild in relation to LA's exceedingly uninhibited and gender-charged art scene. McCarthy's greatest violation was his casual mobilization of heavily loaded gender codes without any discernible end. Inundated by contradictory meanings, one doesn't know whether to bristle, laugh, or vomit.

With *Sailor's Meat*, McCarthy solidified his already established interests in routinized tasks, extreme social impropriety, buffoonish humor, and physical endurance. As in earlier pieces—the hour-long 1970 video *Spinning*, for example, or the late-60s anarchic performances *Too Steep, Too Fast* and *Mountain Bowling*—he comes off as insane, his behaviors both irreverent and utterly senseless. As in the 1974 *Hot Dog* performance, he uses extreme repulsion and semiotic confusion to dislocate the work's setting and substances, transforming the wholesome into the aberrant, the domestic into the degenerate. Produced the following year, *Sailor's Meat* combines these tactics with his emerging interest in masks, makeup, and obviously fake personas meant to break the presumed realism of “concrete performance.” Seams are therefore emphasized, costumes revealed as overt fictions. McCarthy's crude, unsatisfying porn video provokes continuous slippage between masculinity and femininity, forcing such labels and their biological counterparts into a play of open contradiction in which none can ever hold firm. As the artist himself explains, “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.”²⁴

McCarthy's use and abuse of drag in the 1970s evokes more contemporary theories of transvestitism, particularly that of Judith Butler, who posits it as a viable alternative to feminist practices that rely too heavily on predetermined gender classifications. For Butler, cross-dressing is resistant to both patriarchy and essentialism. She advocates a performed disruption of categories that forces the "natural" to rub up against the "unnatural," resulting in a dramatization of the synthetic basis of identity—the fact that all gender is, in truth, a prescribed performance. Drag is thus an ideal strategy, for it presents gender as wholly independent of sex. Gender "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."²⁵ By portraying it as something that can be deliberately performed, Butler explains, "drag imitates the imitative structure of gender, revealing gender as itself an imitation."²⁶

It must be acknowledged, however, that, in the immediate aftermath of McCarthy's most concentrated cross-dressing period, there emerged in American popular culture an abundance of drag performance that hardly threatened, and often reinforced, conventional gender categories. The 1982 blockbuster *Tootsie*, for instance, was often credited with increasing consciousness and fostering a deeper understanding between the sexes.²⁷ Yet, as several critics have pointed out, the movie actually retains stereotypical characterizations of masculinity and femininity—the former connoting strength, confidence, and self-respect, the latter sensitivity and emotionalism.²⁸ Ultimately, it promotes masculine power under the guise of feminist liberation, suggesting that the best kind of woman is a man.²⁹ Underlying a host of other distinctly "hetero" cross-dressing films, plays, rock-and-roll acts, and television shows from this period, the "Tootsie syndrome," as Mira Schor has referred to it, can be understood as a characteristically male response to the feminist disruption of gender norms.³⁰ In such cases patriarchy reasserts its dominance by inhabiting the feminine. As Tanya Modleski explains, "Male power is actually consolidated through cycles of crisis and resolution, whereby men ultimately deal with the threat of female power by incorporating it."³¹ Thus the aforementioned co-optation of "the feminine" by macho male artists, and thus the long-standing tradition of drag in American popular culture, from "Uncle Miltie" on down.³²

Indeed, gender bending has long served as a way of colonizing the feminine. The feminized masculinity of late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century French painting, for example, coincided with a rollback of rights acquired by women during the revolutionary period. According to Abigail Solomon-Godeau, the threat of female power at this time was assuaged by "a cultural fantasy in which the feminine can be conjured away altogether . . . only to be reinscribed and recuperated within a masculine representation."³³ The abundance of gender bending in the 1980s can, Solomon-Godeau argues, similarly be understood as a mitigation of gender anxieties in the wake of feminism's ascent. Hence the schizophrenic nature of 80s popular culture, in which the über-masculine persona and his feminized male counterpart harmoniously coexisted. Alongside the prevalence of men acting as women came an abundance of high-testosterone entertainment—action movies, cop shows, professional wrestling—a seemingly improbable convergence that signals, in Solomon-Godeau's words, a "destabilization of the notion of masculinity."³⁴ *Tootsie* both embodied this crisis and attempted to assuage it by celebrating a

new and improved man—one that shored up patriarchal power as much as it toyed with gender expectations. The film also satisfies homoerotic fantasies without threatening the heteronormative ideals that constitute that power.

McCarthy's drag, by contrast, is consistently sloppy and unstable. Like *Sailor's Meat*, the performances *Meat Cake* and *Tubbing* (1975; plate 6) featured protagonists that were simultaneously masculine and feminine. *Contemporary Cure All* (1978) extended this fragmented cross-dressing to a confusion of body parts and functions. Here, the artist performed a "sex change," affixing plastic 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*, McCarthy enacted a series of obstetric activities within a giant transparent female body form while wearing an inside-out mask of Popeye's cartoon sweetheart. He played doctor, baby, and mother.³⁵ As Ralph Ruggoff puts it, "The 'characters' McCarthy portrayed in his performances often eluded sexual categorization, at times crossing from one gender to another . . . yet most of the time it would be more accurate to say his characters seemed *between* genders, as if occupying some third, transient sex."³⁶ The power of his work depended on this in-between status, on this layering of denaturalized and delegitimized gender codes, whose irrationality was compounded by the absurdity of McCarthy's scenes and the blatant pointlessness of his actions.

The 1976 video *Rocky* (plate 11) is a mordant parody of the Sylvester Stallone movie of the same name and year. Naked except for boxing gloves and a full-head rubber bandit mask, McCarthy alternates between shadowboxing, jerking off, and beating himself with stiff uppercuts, 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 and back to ketchup. The melee continues for over twenty minutes. Grunting and groaning through it all, the artist becomes increasingly exhausted, his self-pummeling ever more excruciating to behold. There is no conclusion to this title bout, no victorious moment; the viewer waits in vain for a climax. McCarthy's boxer simply runs out of energy, unable to stop his self-abuse even as he collapses onto the floor.

Much like McCarthy's other works from this period, *Rocky* involves discomfiting confluences of gender meanings, yet the video stands out because of its focus on masculinity as such. McCarthy employs an inflated and autodestructive manliness to mock the macho persona of the Hollywood hunk. His frank nakedness conflicts with popular representations of male power, whose implied priapic prowess relies on the concealment of the flaccid phallus. Hollywood movies such as *Rocky* display a plethora of bare beefy torsos, but they never breach the strict taboo against frontal nudity. Genitals exposed, McCarthy's *Rocky* is rendered vulnerable, while the menstrual associations and his repeated but failed masturbation emasculate him further. As Amelia Jones has put it, "All of the penises in McCarthy's vast repertoire of works are detachable, pathetic, exposed as contingent flesh rather than proof of masculine transcendence beyond the bodily."³⁷ His is not only an unveiled penis but a limp one.

Meanwhile, the brutal beating and flagrant sexualization of McCarthy's hero underscore the latent desires satisfied by the idealized males featured in American action movies. Typically such figures must endure bodily mutilations—thrashings,

wounds, torture, fistfights—before their final triumph.³⁸ Fetishized, the strapping male body becomes a substitute for the more typically objectified woman. In his version of *Rocky*, McCarthy overplays this formula. He exaggerates the champ's sexuality, desublimating repressed impulses—autoerotic, homoerotic, and sadomasochistic—essential to, but considered inconsistent with, Stallone's icon of supreme masculine virtue. He renders his macho hero impotent and feminized.

In a 1979 overview of the artist's work, Barbara Smith praises McCarthy's treatment of masculinity as a subject in and of itself. She sees his work as consistent with the feminist project as a whole: "To change the female self-image that the male holds it is necessary to change the male self-image and so to change the exact nature of that androgyny. I would guess that the work McCarthy has done with his feminine role is in part completed. He next has taken on the male, who for him creates the very femaleness of the female he has been addressing."³⁹ Yet as with *Sailor's Meat* and *Political Disturbance*, the politics of *Rocky* are not so simple. Acting out both sides of Stallone's character—the punished and the punisher—before a home-movie camera in the privacy of his own bedroom, McCarthy's antihero hardly represents a more nuanced, reformed masculine identity. He's a lunatic. As in his earlier renditions of "action painting"—*Penis Dip Painting* and *Whipping a Wall with Paint*, as well as prior works like *Face Painting—Floor*, *White Line and Face*, *Head, Shoulder Painting—Wall Black Line*—the artist acts like a dope who overindulges in common cultural fantasies, here perpetuated by popular entertainment rather than art. McCarthy's videos and performances expose not only the sheer silliness of such fantasies but their psychosexual underpinnings, their convolutions of perverse pleasures and perils, and their power over our collective imagination. With no transformation or resolution in mind, McCarthy ingests clichés of masculinity and femininity, chews them up together, and spews out the undigested mash. Along the way he makes deliberate and unavoidable allusions to then-current mass culture—everyday supermarket items, Jackson Pollock, Yasser Arafat, *Rocky*—suggesting some grand sociopolitical point that never emerges.

These works not only reflect but revel in the fundamental zaniness of gender—an effect recognized by the artist himself. Defending his work from potential accusations of sexism, McCarthy explains, "There is plenty here that on its lugubrious surface certainly seems aggressively hostile to women, but do the paradigms of misogyny apply to a world without normality? The extreme artifice and insanity, physically underlining the constructedness of the world the artist creates, with its overloaded clichés of male power, dissolve into absurdity."⁴⁰

CAUGHT IN THE ZIPPER: PETTIBON'S BELLIGERENT VIXENS AND FEEBLE HEROES

In a drawing from Pettibon's 1984 zine *Lana* (fig. 4.2), a blond woman in a cocktail dress and evening gloves emerges from the black shadow of an open doorway. She has a gun in her hand. The work's only tagline, "CAUGHT IN THE ZIPPER," is ambiguous—until one realizes that while she is looking into the viewer's eyes, her pistol is aimed at his crotch. Such sordid sirens appear throughout Pettibon's oeuvre, each a riff on standard patriarchal representations of femininity. Comfortable with their bodies as well as their weapons, these women are frequently shown naked and



4.2.

Raymond Pettibon, No Title (Caught in the zipper), *Lana*, p. 4, 1984. Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles © Raymond Pettibon.

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engaged in some sort of precoital, coital, or postcoital activity. Yet they routinely break free of their conventional roles as sex objects. Pettibon transforms his pin-ups, dark seductresses, and submissive participants into brutal killers, cruel avengers, and rabid nymphomaniacs. In the 1985 cover of *Cars, TV, Rockets, H-Bomb—You Name It* (fig. 4.3), a naked woman in stilettos wields a bloody ax over a decapitated male head. Her matter-of-fact 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 moodiness is a result of her need to get laid.

Pettibon depicts women as overwhelmingly sexual and pugnaciously offput-

ting at the same time. Characteristically, his works occupy a fine line between misogyny and feminism. His juxtapositions of texts and imagery complicate the reception of his characters—often by actually uncomplicating the issues at play in that reception. Through hyperbole and crude simplification, he caricatures the sadomasochism that underlies established conventions of representation. His drawings accentuate the fact that patriarchy cultivates both a desire to dominate and a desire to be dominated by women, a presumption of female weakness alongside an inflated fear of female power. The iconic film noir vamp, for example, is a repeated Pettibon subject—featured in the image from *Lana* and numerous other drawings—yet he usually replaces her elegance and cool detachment with wanton nastiness and ruthless violence. The hyperaggressiveness of Pettibon’s female characters is almost always directed at men—husbands, lovers, fathers—most of whom are present only in the accompanying text or as the external focus of these women’s rage or desire. It is the male heterosexual viewer who is routinely “caught in the zipper.” Yet Pettibon’s violent, conniving, sex-obsessed women are so over the top that, much like his homicidal hippies, they cannot be received as anything but ludicrous, if not laughable. Pettibon simultaneously evokes two contradictory stereotypes of femininity—woman as overly emotional and woman as cold-hearted temptress, the bitch and the femme fatale—forcing them to operate against each other and highlighting the misogyny that underlies both.

Pettibon’s scenes are populated by incongruous characters whose grotesque qualities render them incompatible with conventional labels. Rather than shy away from cruel stereotypes, he deploys them freely. Instead of engaging in stale debates, he forces offensive things together and leaves the viewer to squirm. The gender politics of his work remains obscure, an effect exacerbated by his trademark use of multiple voices and multivalent allusions. Pettibon frequently features traditional exemplars of masculinity and femininity that, despite being outdated, continue to influence contemporary American culture. Through such types he underscores contemporary male anxieties in the face of newly empowered women and in the wake of an often misconstrued feminist movement. His female characters exhibit a range of “masculine” qualities—physical strength, supreme confidence, vigorous sexuality. They mock the specter of the empowered man-hating feminist, a myth with particular currency at the time these works were produced. In defiance of the reactionary antifeminism and reentrenched masculinity of the 1980s and early 1990s, Pettibon offers a sustained assault on the male viewer, leaving him both vulnerable and accountable.

And feminized. Pettibon often combines this excessive inflation of female power with an explicit deflation of male power. Emotionally confused and physically weak, his unmanly men stand in stark contrast to his violent vamps. In a 1984 drawing, also from *Lana*, a middle-aged woman glares out from the page, a venomous expression on her face. The accompanying words are those of her apologetic off-screen lover: “I CAME TOO FAST.” Clearly she’s not happy about it. Rather than confront a gun aimed at his crotch, the viewer is cast as an inadequate performer, the object of this woman’s scornful and unforgiving gaze. The drawing strikes to the very core of male sexual confidence.

When Pettibon portrays actual men on his pages, they are no less meek and feeble. In a scene from his 1983 zine *Capricious Missives* (fig. 4.4), a dejected son

43.

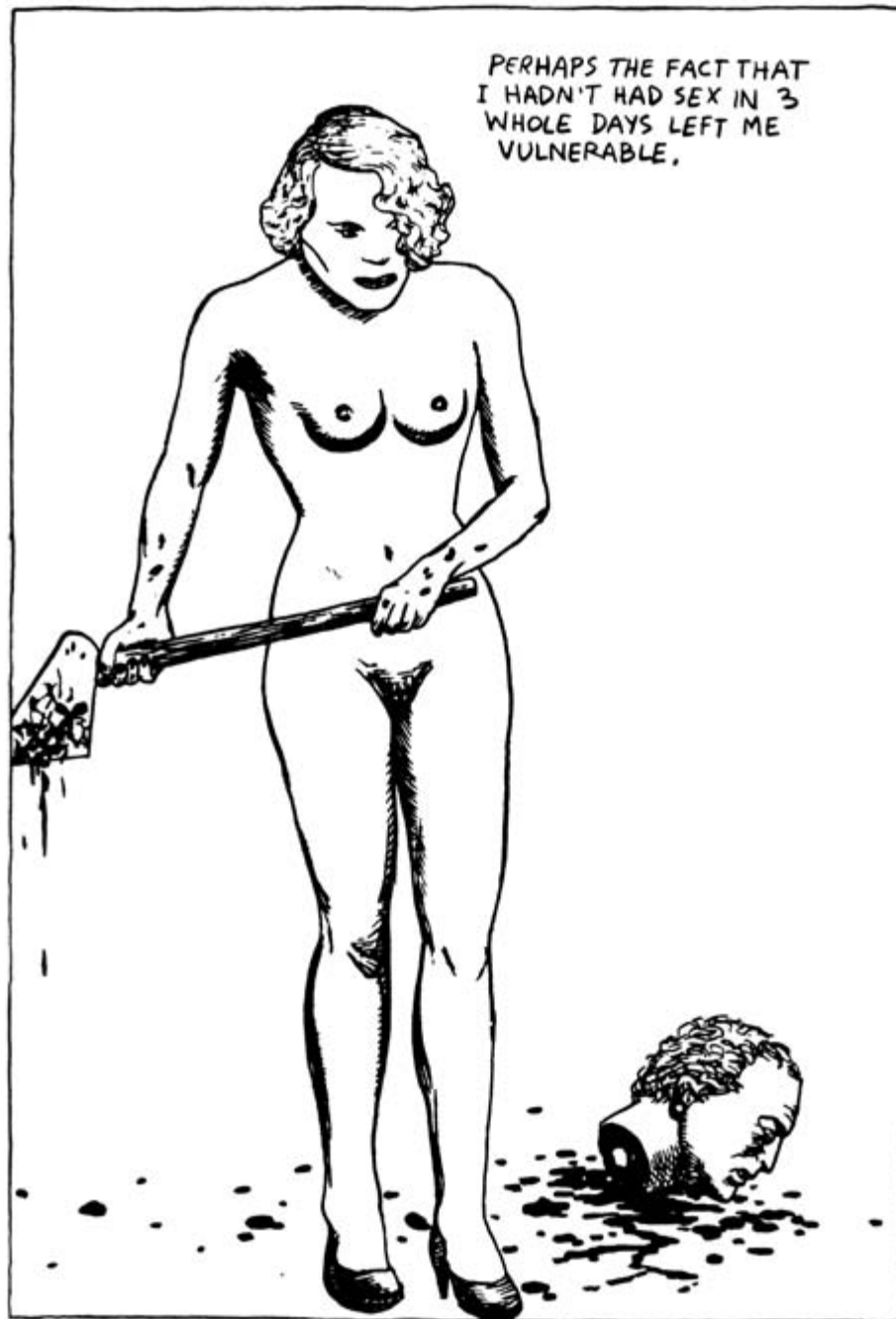
Raymond Pettibon,
No Title (Perhaps
the fact), *Cars, TV
Rockets, H-Bomb—
You Name It*, cover,
1985. Courtesy Regen
Projects, Los Angeles
© Raymond Pettibon.

CARS, TV, ROCKETS,
H-BOMB--YOU NAME IT.

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7

SST PUBS

sits slumped on his parents' living room sofa, complaining to his mother: "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 into her handkerchief, devastated by her boy's failure to live up to his father's manliness. Here the inadequacy is one of appearance rather than sexual prowess. A real man, the work suggests, must properly don the uniform of masculinity by displaying prescribed signs of machismo—in this case, a mustache. He must also satisfy his mother's expectations.

A page from *The Pleasure-Giving Arts* (1990) similarly highlights the pressure to adopt a preordained male gender role and the humiliation that comes from an inability to do so. 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." Both this drawing and the one from *Capricious Missives* present masculine identity as a convention forced upon sons by their fathers and reinforced through locker-room relations. Pettibon portrays this cycle of social conditioning as traumatic, yet also as the very basis of masculine culture. He also characterizes society's measures of manliness as not only restrictive but arbitrary and superficial. As in McCarthy's early performances and videos, gender is depicted as an artifice—a matter of football or facial hair.

These works can be linked to the Los Angeles subculture in which Pettibon came of age. Whereas the hippies had previously inverted certain perceived gender norms, for instance making long hair appropriate for men, much of the unisex punk style—shaved hair, black leather, chains, aggressive snarl—tilted decidedly toward the conventionally masculine.⁴¹ Indeed, punk was mainly a male-oriented movement—a "boys' subculture."⁴² At the same time, however, the androgyny of punk style was relatively intricate, disjointed, tinged with irony and self-conscious artifice. As Dick Hebdige argued in his landmark 1979 study of punk semiotics, this "bricolage" approach "challeng[ed] at a symbolic level the 'inevitability,' the 'naturalness' of . . . gender stereotypes."⁴³ It also allowed heterosexual men to indulge in the traditionally feminine realm of fashion, including not only clothing but also makeup, piercings, and hair dye.⁴⁴

Pettibon's work relates to this willful intermingling of masculine and feminine conventions, yet the hardcore scene with which he was specifically affiliated was, as discussed, distinct in both style and sensibility. If punk was generally a "boy's subculture," hardcore was emphatically macho. Punk flair was replaced by a simpler, more straightforward uniform—crew cut, heavy boots, jeans, and T-shirt (or no shirt at all)—and the only androgyny permitted was that of the few female participants, who embraced a similar "tomboy" look.⁴⁵ The scene was also decidedly angrier and more aggressively confrontational than its LA punk counterpart, which was dismissed by hardcore fans as too soft, arty, and commercialized. Concerts were often violent exhibitions of proud and unalloyed masculinity. For fans this usually meant slam-dancing—the indigenous South Bay expression that involves young men crowded into a "slam pit" and smashing themselves into one another—and the bruises and bloody gashes that resulted were considered evidence of hardcore authenticity. Lee Ving, lead singer of Fear, boasted, "We started playing as fast



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44.
Raymond Pettibon,
No Title (I just
couldn't), *Capricious
Missives*, p. 11,
1983. Courtesy Regen
Projects, Los Angeles
© Raymond Pettibon.

as you could fucking think and the crowd would go berserk, pounding the shit out of each other in the pit.”⁴⁶ Or, as Mike Ness of Social Distortion more pithily summarized it, “We were the testosterone crowd.”⁴⁷ This meant frequent physical altercations with anyone—police, parents, hippies, jocks—who either did not accept the hardcore look and attitude or questioned its rough-and-tough image.⁴⁸ Overt misogyny likewise prevailed, as epitomized by the Adolescents song “L.A. Girl”:

I'm bored of the sleazy make-up
You'd fuck any guy in town
Your life's a total mess-up
Why the hell do you hang around?

Whereas earlier punk bands like the Sex Pistols flaunted the sadomasochistic overtones of their getups, hardcore groups were practically puritan. Unlike virtually all other forms of rock and roll, its songs rarely crow about love or sex. As Steven Blush puts it:

Hardcore was the first Rock Music that sexuality did not drive—for many, it was a relief, like, “Look, I’m not getting laid anyway, so why should I listen to music that says I’m gonna?” If anything, most participants were raging asexuals. . . . Hardcore boys saw girls as outsiders, even distractions. Chicks got their best shot at acceptance as photographers, DJs or zine editors. Of course, on the scene’s periphery lurked plenty of stereotypical skanks who guys mistreated and/or sponged off.⁴⁹

Pettibon acknowledged such dynamics yet interpreted them differently. The drawings that make up *New Wave Gravy 2* propose that the hardcore scene was in fact founded upon sexuality, but a type that conflicted with the über-masculine posture of its participants. The main function of the macho hardcore image—and the willful asexuality of the scene overall—was arguably to conceal its fundamental homoerotics. Along with the images mentioned in chapter 3, several pages from the zine portray nude or seminude male fans—requisite Black Flag logos tattooed to their arms—in romantic embraces. Another features a fellow fan wearing his girlfriend’s earring and admiring himself in a mirror. In such drawings Pettibon portrays hardcore machismo as a facade; they render explicit a critique implied by numerous other emasculating works—from the *Tripping Corpse* concert “review,” in which Pettibon facetiously derides the lead singer for spoiling his self-inflicted wounds by sealing them with Krazy Glue, to the pathetic antics of *Sir Drone* characters Jinx and Dwayne, who sit together in their underwear and worry about what their mothers think of their hairstyles and whether they really have to cut their fingers on the guitar strings.

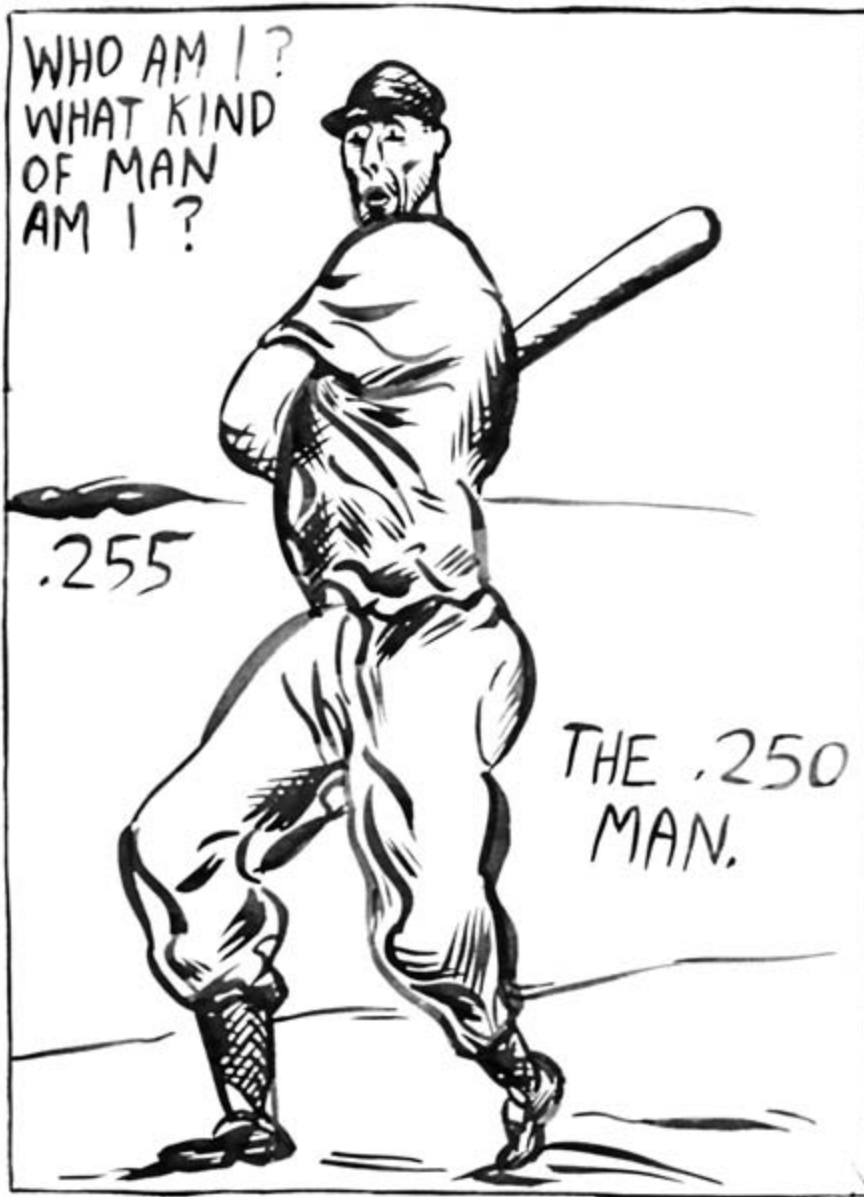
Pettibon’s early works also make repeated reference to older, more entrenched models of masculinity. In *Captive Chains*, his first zine, the 1950s-style gang members must prove their manliness through sex, knife fights, getting drunk, and tattooing their names on their girlfriends. Subsequent drawings feature similarly long-standing prototypes—most often baseball players and comic-book superheroes—that continue to hold sway over American male identity. As he does with his punks, Pettibon reconfigures such prototypes by suggesting more nuanced interpretations of their social significance, undermining their roles as carriers of clear-cut gender ideals. Indeed, Pettibon’s use of these outdated gender clichés is not unlike Kelley’s and McCarthy’s use of Jackson Pollock, an equally time-honored—and no less cartoonish—icon of masculinity dating from the same midcentury period. Pettibon perhaps intended to draw parallels between such clichés and the supposedly fresh rebellious self-image of his punk peers—between the hardcore macho persona and old-time ballplayers and superheroes, as well as between tough “tomboy” punk women and the femme fatale. In any case, his drawings certainly underscore the obsolescence of earlier gender dynamics in an increasingly com-



45.
Raymond Pettibon,
No Title (My first
orgasm), *Capricious
Missives*, p. 8,
1983. Courtesy Regen
Projects, Los Angeles
© Raymond Pettibon.

plex contemporary era—an effect that was especially resonant in the 1980s and early 1990s, when pre-60s gender ideals appeared widely resurgent.

Posing a challenge to that very resurgence, Pettibon humorously identifies homosexual tendencies and psychological insecurities lurking beneath traditional models of masculinity and their reception. In a page from *Capricious Missives* (1983; fig. 4.5), a man's thumb holds down a baseball card of Ted Kluszewski, the 1950s



4.6.

Raymond Pettibon, No
Title (Who am I?),
1987. Courtesy Regen
Projects, Los Angeles
© Raymond Pettibon.

first baseman for the Cincinnati Reds, above the line “MY FIRST ORGASM.” Here the beefy, sleeveless baseball player—Big Klu, as he was nicknamed—embodies two supposedly incongruous impulses: he is both a paradigm of normative masculinity and an object of the homoerotic desire underlying male worship of athletic heroes. An untitled drawing from 1987 (fig. 4.6) also depicts an old-time ballplayer dressed in a baggy 1950s-style uniform. Like the Big Klu work, this drawing must be seen in relation to Pettibon’s ultra-macho milieu, as well as the more general conservatism of the time, particularly the reactionary attempt to recover the mythic “normalcy” of the 1950s. Figures of American nostalgia, Pettibon’s ballplayers personify what was commonly considered a more genuine time, when values were supposedly stable and life was simpler—a time when men were men. In the 1987 work, however,

the protagonist's thoughts betray his true 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 unattainable for all but the all-star athlete.

Pettibon's superhero works similarly draw attention to male icons' dual function as models of virtuosity and self-possession and vessels of repressed desire. Coursing with testosterone, superheroes are archetypes of virility, quintessential role models for young boys. Pettibon unmask these characters, revealing internal conflicts and insecurities incompatible with the self-confidence, moral clarity, and gender specificity that form the core of superhero myths. Responsible for protecting social and cultural norms against the forces of turmoil, their absolute assurance is the counterpart to their superhuman physical might.⁵⁰ 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.⁵¹ Perverting this ideal, Pettibon distinguishes himself from his pop art predecessors, who also presented comic-book heroes as carriers of American values. In Roy Lichtenstein's paintings, for example, the traditional gender divisions conveyed by his sources remain intact. Indeed, Lichtenstein's early-1960s military and romance works underscore these divisions. As Benjamin H. D. Buchloh explains, Pettibon instead "invests the anodyne cult figures of the comics with a heretofore unknown, unimaginable, if not forbidden, psychic life of their own . . . precisely that complex spectrum of human desire that the comics had traditionally repressed in order to facilitate the collective projection of infantile bliss and delusional supernatural powers."⁵² The lewd private acts and contradictory feelings revealed by Pettibon's superheroes have no place in the antiseptic fantasy world of the conventional comic book.

In a drawing from 1992, 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 nos-
trils, 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 recasts the Dynamic Duo as a closeted gay couple. The scandalous humor of this forces consideration of the presumed heterosexuality of superheroes, who in fact rarely display any form of romantic tendency. In the comic's original incarnation, the potential homosexual underpinnings of male relations are safely channeled into the partnership of Batman and Robin, whose heterosexuality is secured by their superhero status.⁵³ Yet allegations that this is only a thin veil have been made by fans and critics alike. In "The Myth of Superman" (1979), Umberto Eco recognizes "the consistently homosexual nature of characters like Superman or Batman," citing the latter as an especially emphatic example.⁵⁴ In

Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology (1992), Richard Reynolds points out that whereas Batman is probably the least sexual superhero, exhibiting an “ascetic and asexual persona,” his image betrays an “exaggerated and kinky form of macho sex appeal.”⁵⁵ Pettibon desublimates this sexuality and uses it to attack the rigid standards of behavior posited by such emblems of masculinity. As Richard Dyer has pointed out, this particular technique can be highly effective in undermining those behavioral standards and their broad social implications. Dyer 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.”⁵⁶ Pettibon employs this tactic to expose the homoerotics present not only between Batman and Robin but also—not unlike his own music subculture—between male fans and their superhero idols.

As much as any superhero, Batman’s role is to protect the “normal” order of things against a litany of supervillains who seek to disrupt that order.⁵⁷ His 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 such malfeasants. The comic provides standards of appropriate male behavior, both in its Manichaeian 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.”⁵⁸ The superhero world is one in which distinctions are clear, fixed, and absolute. Pettibon’s protagonists violate the rules of the genre by simultaneously imparting a host of conflicting impulses—cool rationalism and romantic passion, physical might and emotional fragility, self-assurance and psychological insecurity, heterosexuality and homosexuality.⁵⁹

In the end, Pettibon’s works serve as trenchant reflections of current norms and confusions. Such works respond not only to the gender politics of the time—the rise of conservatism, the backlash against feminism, the return to “family values”—but also to the corresponding resurgence of traditional stereotypes in the mass media. As mentioned, alongside the return of prefeminist female models, American popular culture in the 1980s and early 1990s was home to ultra-masculine characters as one-dimensional as Superman and Batman.⁶⁰ Pettibon’s female characters strike out at men both physically and psychologically, tapping their insecurities and threatening their manliness. His male characters, whether human or superhuman, reveal issues and motives that sit at the core of patriarchal social dynamics but that are commonly considered incompatible with “normal” masculine identity. Pettibon’s drawings are not attempts to deflect blame or skirt gender issues by carping about the restrictive gender standards placed on men. They are anything but sympathetic to the male viewer. Rather, they attempt to disorient that viewer, to place him in the uncomfortable position of having to face his presumptions about both sexes, to question his heroes, his desires, and consequently himself.

MANLY CRAFTS: KELLEY'S (OXY)MORONIC NEEDLE AND WOOD WORK

As mentioned, Kelley's combination of "womanly" craft with "manly" action painting challenges both patriarchal myths of art—abstract expressionist and neo-expressionist, as well as countless other iterations of masculine genius—and the feminist promotion of female-coded imagery, materials, and techniques. *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid* belongs to a long lineage of riffs on Jackson Pollock, the art-world icon of mid-twentieth-century masculinity.⁶¹ Along with McCarthy's parodies, these include a wide range of work from the 1950s and early 1960s—Yves Klein's human paintbrush performances, Robert Rauschenberg's combines, Jasper Johns's paintings, Claes Oldenburg's droopy commodities, Roy Lichtenstein's comic brushstrokes, Niki de Saint Phalle's shooting pictures. Subsequently, artists such as Shigeko Kubota, Lynda Benglis, and Keith Boadwee have evoked the abstract expressionist gesture specifically to confront the presumed masculinity and heterosexuality of action painting.⁶² The issues raised by Benglis's late-60s and early-70s "fling, dribble, and drip" pieces, for example, foreshadowed those raised by Kelley's 80s and early-90s knit-works. Benglis's *Odalisque (Hey, Hey Frankenthaler)* (1969) is a congealed stream of brightly pigmented latex that affixes the heroic manliness of Pollock's splatter to "feminine" decoration, softness, sensuality, horizontality, and excess.⁶³ *More Love Hours* complicates matters further by combining "high" art and discourse with "low" craft and gift giving and by saturating the work in a shrewdly dumb brand of humor that deflates multiple positions at once.

In that wall hanging and a host of subsequent craft-based works, Kelley recuperates some of his earliest artistic strategies. His crass humor and cheeky appropriation of cheap thrift-store objects recall the mid-1970s musical grotesqueries of *Destroy All Monsters*, while his "inappropriate" use of heavily coded materials, imagery, and techniques is rooted in his paintings from the same period. As discussed in chapter 2, works such as *Elegy to the Symbionese Liberation Army* (1975; plate 8), *In Anticipation of America's Bicentennial* (1975), and *Painting with Hawaiian Mask, Ballerina, and De Stijl Painting* (1976; fig. 2.1) embodied what Kelley understood as "a politics of the formal," inspired by Jim Nutt, Peter Saul, and others. Like those deliberately trashy undergraduate paintings, *More Love Hours* offhandedly combines high modernist form with kitschy craftwork, whose social connotations cannot be overlooked, dismissed, or neatly compartmentalized. Kelley had been intimately aware of such connotations from an early age. His mother was, as he puts it, "extremely into crafts," often sewing and making quilts and various gewgaws for her nieces.⁶⁴ Moreover, as discussed in chapter 2, his earliest conception of art was largely shaped by women—a Catholic schoolteacher, a neighbor, Sister Mary Corita Kent—engaged in craft-based activities. Once Kelley even adopted "womanly" activities as a form of adolescent rebellion against his father, who had been pressuring him to engage in sports and other conventionally masculine pursuits: "To spite him, I took up sewing. . . . I sewed a very crude doll which I laid on my bed. I also collected a group of prissy dolls from garage sales and arranged them about my bedroom."⁶⁵

Kelley's later craftworks are similarly provocative; they are essentially, he explains, "about playing with gender expectations. It seems odd for a man to play with crafts, sewing and stuffed animals."⁶⁶ In his 1989 *Manly Craft* series (fig. 4.7)



47.
Mike Kelley, *Manly
Craft #3*, 1989.
Courtesy Kelley
Studio, Inc.

this tactic becomes more flagrant (and shameless). Here pairs of yarn octopi—simple dolls made from yarn wrapped around a Styrofoam ball—are bound into obviously phallic objects. These hand-woven dildos, with their braided cocks and perpetually smiling balls, are supremely perverse, oscillating between homemade cuddly playthings and castrated penises nailed to a wall. The discord between the flaccidity of the yarn and the erect postures of the organs enhances their

incongruity. Again Kelley triggers a clash of the “feminine” and the “masculine,” a conflict compounded by the artist’s own maleness. Yet his *Manly Crafts* do not just buck norms. They are phalluses. To counter the emasculation that inevitably comes with his choice of materials, Kelley asserts his maleness in the crassest way possible—but to no avail, for the connotations of the materials are simply too powerful. Ruder and dumber than *More Love Hours*, the *Manly Crafts* series strips the issue to its bare essence, producing objects that cannot be contained by conventional categories. Kelley’s penises are not only wimpy and impotent but improbably—impossibly—feminine.

Of course Kelley is hardly the first to use phallic forms to upend gender conventions. Several feminist artists of the 1970s exploited the image of the erect penis, both to advance women’s sexual liberation and to resist sexist culture and the objectification of women.⁶⁷ In works by Anita Steckel, Judith Bernstein, Eunice Golden, Joan Semmel and others, the phallus functions either as an object of desire or as a symbol of patriarchal power and domination. Its exaggeration draws attention to the double standards by which women are subjugated and marginalized. Certain artists, however, have opted for a deflation rather than an inflation of the penis, feminizing it in ways more akin to Kelley’s *Manly Crafts*. Louise Bourgeois’s 1968–69 sculpture *La Fillette*, for example, is a huge flayed penis hung on a wire meat-hook—a violent assault on the prime object of manhood, further enfeebled by the work’s title. Such instances are not limited to the work of women. Bourgeois’s “little girl” can be seen as a more aggressive version of Constantin Brancusi’s 1916 *Princess X*, which parodies the typically phallic qualities of Western sculpture by combining an alluring penile form with a feminine title. More relevantly, the work of Claes Oldenburg provides an important precedent to Kelley’s emasculations. Oldenburg’s 1965 *Soft Dormeyer Mixers* is a stuffed sculpture of four kitchen appliances presented as a series of limp phalluses hanging on a rack. *Lipstick on Caterpillar Tracks* (1969) is another blatantly phallic form, made from a lipstick mounted on bulldozer treads. Like Kelley’s yarn penises, these works are incongruous (and humorous) mixtures of gendered form and gendered content. And as with Kelley, Oldenburg’s own maleness enhances the contradictions elicited by his work.⁶⁸

Kelley’s craftworks not only address the feminist focus on “women’s work” but also satirize an equally prominent premise of 1970s LA-based feminism: that vaginal imagery should be the lingua franca of women’s art. According to Judy Chicago and fellow Feminist Art Program founder Miriam Schapiro, proper “female iconography” should feature a “central cavity,” by which the woman artist “takes that mark of her otherness and . . . establishes a vehicle by which to state the truth and beauty of her identity.”⁶⁹ Kelley arrived at Cal Arts in the immediate wake of the FAP, which ended in 1975, and he remembers feeling ambivalent about its legacy: “Politically, I supported it. Aesthetically I did not. . . . I had respect for these women who were making these craftworks, who wanted to have it put into art history. But at the same time, I thought they were wrong. I didn’t think that they should subscribe to these gender clichés.”⁷⁰

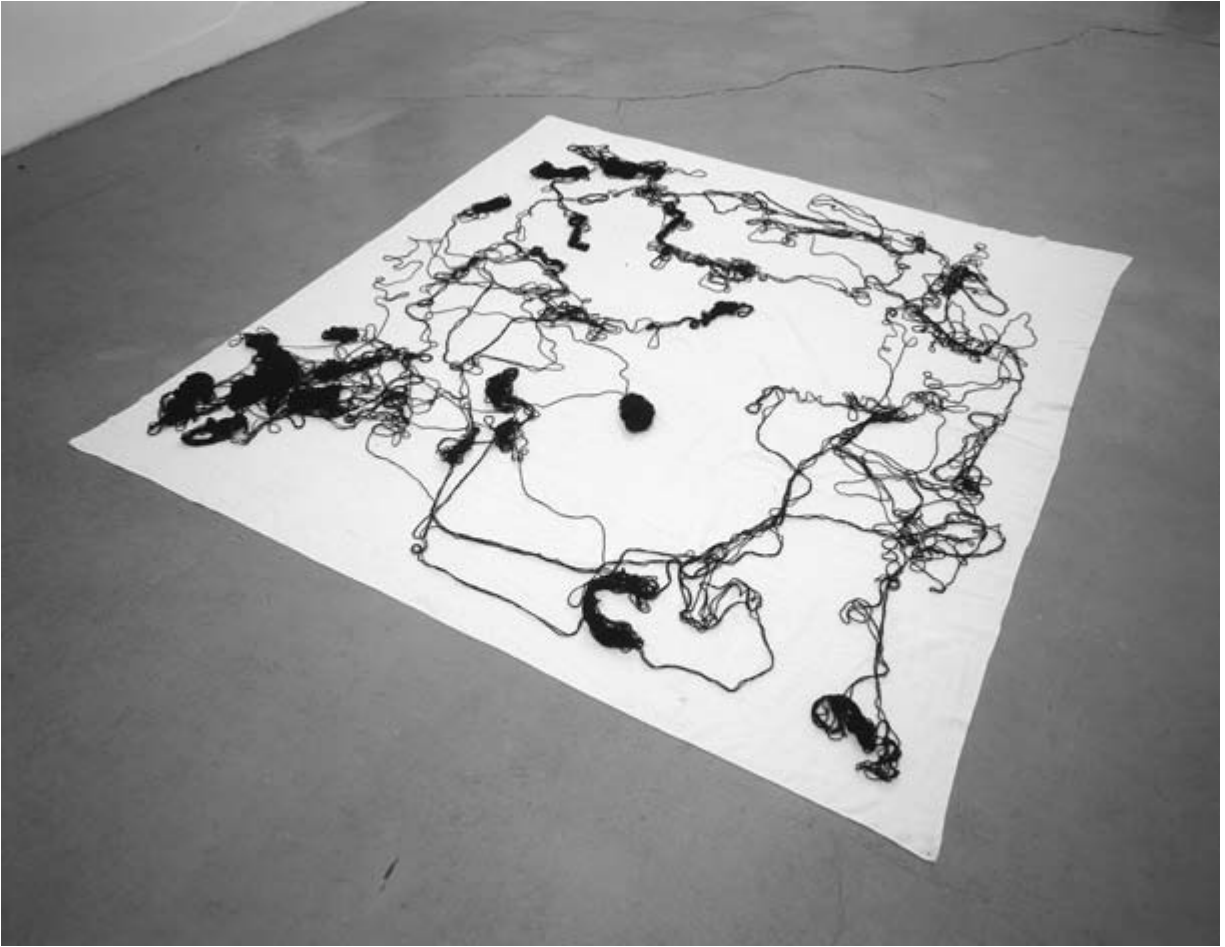
With his *Manly Craft* series Kelley facetiously extended the logic of such strategies, making phallocentric art as a male counterpart to gynocentric art. Like McCarthy’s performances, Kelley’s assemblages suggest a buffoonish persona—a male artist whose warped understanding of contemporary gender theory has apparently

inspired a desublimation of repressed desires. By combining phallic iconography with “feminine” materials and techniques, Kelley exposes the limitations of equating the genitals—penis or vagina—with gender identity. Yet his work is no more antifeminist than his mid-70s paintings were anti-Symbionese or anti-Bicentennial. Instead, his craftworks aggressively obfuscate social meaning. Gender was ideally suited for this kind of disarticulation, because it seemed so politically charged on the one hand and so convoluted on the other. Grotesque humor functions here as a way to reflect this convolution. Kelley’s sculptures relate to the broad reevaluation of feminism in the 1980s, when critics and art historians such as Rozsika Parker, Griselda Pollock, Judith Barry, and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis denounced vaginal imagery and “feminine” craftwork as regressive and potentially counterproductive.⁷¹ In the words of Barry and Flitterman-Lewis, such work employs an “aesthetics of simple inversion” that fails to take into account that “‘femininity’ itself is a social construct.”⁷² Kelley extrapolates this point, highlighting the constructed and confused nature of both femininity and masculinity. His works resist restrictive gender definitions advanced at various times by both ends of the political spectrum.

However, these works do not merely constitute an attack on essentialism, nor are they simply dialectical deconstructions of cultural binaries and outdated categories. The humorous depravity of Kelley’s assemblages—their unmitigated rudeness and the implication of a degenerate artist-persona—clashes with their cerebral implications, draining the seriousness from his endeavor. These assemblages provide perverse pleasures, not only for the naughty artist, who shamelessly plays with inappropriate objects and materials, but also for the viewer, who gets to share in that naughtiness. Many smile along with Kelley, but others recoil, deflecting their own discomfort onto the artist himself, at times even accusing him of being a pervert.⁷³ (The fact that, as will be discussed in chapter 6, Kelley uses children’s toys only exacerbates matters.) For the more self-aware viewer, these works say more about his or her own values than about the artist’s. “Looking at ourselves looking at the grotesque,” Geoffrey Galt Harpham explains, “we can observe our own projections, catching ourselves, as it were, in the act of perception.”⁷⁴

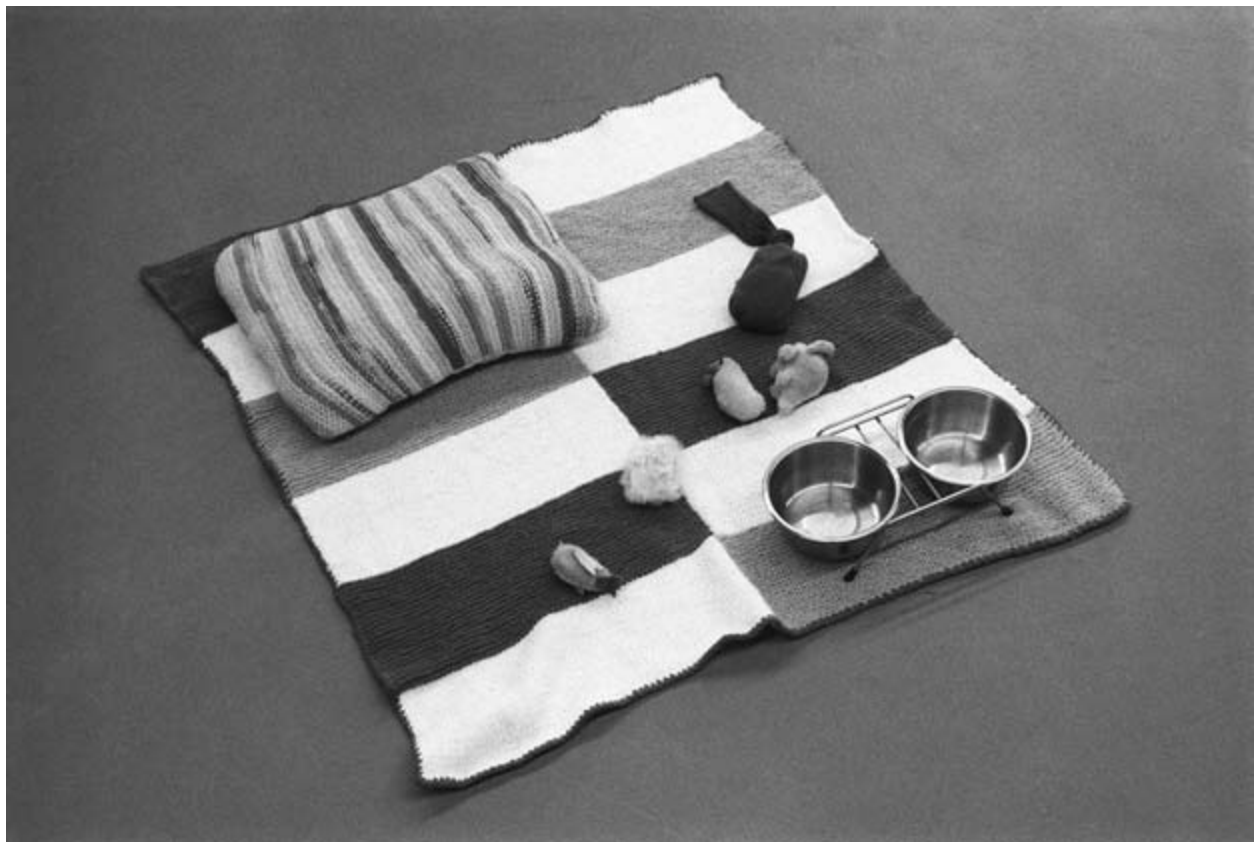
Kelley’s early 1990s afghan-and-doll floor works are similarly knotty. With its swirls of black yarn on a white blanket, *Untitled (Yarn)* (1990; fig. 4.8), for example, is another riff on Pollock’s painting technique. More often, though, these works recall minimalism, a movement with its own conventional gender connotations. Situated on the floor and in direct confrontation with the space of the spectator who circulates around them, Kelley’s sculptures mimic the gridlike, pedestal-less arrangements of artists such as Carl Andre and Donald Judd. Like them, he places his floor pieces in rectangular formations with close attention to qualities of color, material, and composition. In *Arena #1 (Blue and Red)* (1990) and *Arena #9 (Blue Bunny)* (1990, plate 20), colors are deliberately coordinated to emphasize the abstract qualities of the forms, and in *Mooney* (1990; fig. 4.9), geometric composition is likewise carefully calibrated. In Kelley’s hands, however, minimalism’s hard, industrial aesthetic and clean, shiny surfaces become soft, handmade, ratty, and worn, and its “pure” abstraction is sullied by figurative, if not narrative, allusions.

Like *More Love Hours*, these works obscure distinctions between “high” art and arts-and-crafts keepsake—and between the gender associations such distinctions facilitate. Indeed, as with abstract expressionism, the “masculinity” of minimalism



has been repeatedly asserted—both in the criticism of the time and in more recent histories. Around the time of Kelley’s afghan series, art historian Anna Chave was attempting to decipher the gender implications of minimalism, arguing that this primarily male movement reinscribed dominant patriarchal authority. Whereas more conventional accounts 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,” Chave points out 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.” This, she contends, 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.⁷⁵ Yet as with abstract expressionism, such readings are excessive, not only relying on gendered notions of style and material but ignoring the diversity of the movement and the fact that the work of several contemporaneous women artists similarly features gridlike arrangements and industrial materials.⁷⁶ In truth, “minimalism” was neither conceptually nor formally cohesive.⁷⁷ In a 1992 essay, Kelley acknowledges this fact, citing the tendency of historians to disregard artists that do not fit canonical understandings—and gendered readings. He refers to Larry Bell as “one of those critically hated ‘decora-

48.
Mike Kelley, *Untitled (Yarn)*, 1990. Courtesy Kelley Studio, Inc.; photograph by Douglas M. Parker.



tive' minimalists" and complains that John McCracken's lipstick-colored planks are dismissed by critics as "sissy minimalism."⁷⁸

Not unlike McCarthy's early-1970s minimalism parodies—*Ketchup Sandwich*, as well as his various geometric arrangements of everyday commodities—Kelley's floor works resemble minimalist sculpture but violate nearly every presumption of what such work should be. His assemblages oscillate among multiple, traditionally oppositional readings. As the artist puts it: "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."⁷⁹ The softness of Kelley's knit materials augments the domestic (read: "feminine") connotations to which he refers. In a 1989 essay he recognizes a similar effect in the "softened" imagery of Oldenburg, Saul, and Salvador Dalí, praising all three for performing "a kind of artistic gender bending."⁸⁰

The key to Kelley's own artistic gender bending—as with McCarthy's cross-dressing—is its in-between status, its obvious incompleteness, which precludes his work from functioning as just another example of co-opted femininity shrouded in masculinity. Indeed, this type of disjointed, self-conscious gender bending turns his work into a critique of that very convention. In an essay titled "Cross-Gender/Cross-Genre," Kelley acknowledges the power of this approach in the work of several early-1970s performers—"anti-hippie" rock bands such as the Mothers of Invention and the Alice Cooper band, and especially the Cockettes, an outlandish San Francisco-based transvestite performance troupe that billed itself as the Theatre of Sexual Role Confusion:

49.
Mike Kelley, *Mooner*,
1990. Courtesy Kelley
Studio, Inc.

“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 also cites the late-1960s and early-1970s films of John Waters, which, he explains, feature “a similar play with gender slippage in the figure of the grotesque ‘drag queen’ Divine, who could never be mistaken for a woman.”⁸¹ Judith Butler likewise praises Waters’s films for suggesting that “gender is a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as the real.”⁸² As Kelley points out, however, it is not just drag but *incomplete* drag that allows for this effect: it is only by presenting gender as an artifice distinct from sex that one reveals, in Butler’s terms, gender’s inherently performative status. For the latter to be successful, the transformation must remain explicitly deficient, and attention must be directed to that deficiency. Kelley too performs a kind of “half-accomplished” drag—more gender smashup than gender bending—that not only reveals the artificiality of both masculinity and femininity and exposes the traditionally seamless and covert appropriation of “the feminine” by male artists, but undercuts the rigid ideological gender debates of the day. Indeed, that self-serious ideological rigidity, rather than feminism and sexism themselves, is the true target of Kelley’s hilarious unmanly man-forms and unwomanly women’s work.

Kelley hammers his point home in a 1992 series of sculptures produced for *Documenta 9*—a series that brought to a conclusion his direct and sustained engagement with this subject matter.⁸³ *Kneading Board* (plate 12) is a giant slab of wood shaped like a breadboard, adorned with real breadboards and similarly shaped spanking paddles.⁸⁴ Scaled to the human body, the device seems to have been designed for initiation beatings common in frat-house hazing, yet its title and its Pennsylvania Dutch decorative motif make clear reference to the “feminine” domestic sphere. Who or what is supposed to be “kneaded” here, dough or dude?

In most of the works from this series Kelley eschews “womanly” references entirely. Employing a strategy of exaggeration rather than hybridization, these works exclusively engage male-oriented materials, techniques, and connotations. They recall his graduate-school birdhouse sculptures, which similarly evoke masculine culture and personas. Here, at last, are manly crafts worthy of the name. As Kelley explains: “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.”⁸⁵ Again, this approach can be linked to Kelley’s own background. While his mother sewed and made quilts, his father was responsible for the more masculine household duties: “He did all the home repairs himself—poorly, I might add. He was not a craftsman. He just got the job done. But he had all his own tools, and if a shelf needed to be made, he would make it.”⁸⁶

Kelley’s do-it-yourself apparatuses have all the trappings of masculine prowess but are of extremely dubious functionality. *Colema Bench* is a seven-foot-high colon-cleansing machine, consisting of a wood bench with a hole leading to a pail underneath. Overhead hangs a plastic bucket, presumably to be filled with water,

which would flow through a tube and into the rectum of the person sitting above the hole. The question of why someone would ever craft his own colon cleanser is compounded by the fact that, as Jan Avgikos has pointed out, the mechanism's "absorbent, unfinished plywood . . . would become easily soiled with runny brown fecal juice and nasty after one usage."⁸⁷ Similarly impractical, *Primaling Cabinet* is a human-sized box made from wood, metal, and acoustic foam. Intended as a private space for the release of pent-up emotions, it specifically recalls the "primal" rituals advocated at this time by the men's movement. But because of its two cloth-covered holes, Kelley's hideaway functions as a speaker rather than a sound-proof chamber.⁸⁸ Like the *Colema Bench*, the device is utterly counterproductive.

Other works present the private male as degenerate. Tinkering away in their basements, these handymen seem to have allowed their depraved desires to get the better of them. *Private Address System* is a modified porta-potty with a pair of bullhorn-speakers mounted on the roof. Inside the booth, two microphones, one in the toilet bowl and the other next to it, are connected to these external speakers. The work evokes a common adolescent male custom of proudly publicizing the magnitude of one's bowel movements and the gratification brought by them, to the riotous amusement of one's buddies. *Torture Table* moves into darker realms. Consisting of a plywood platform set upon four sawhorses, the table is equipped with a blue plastic pillow and holes positioned at the head and genitals, with a metal bowl inset beneath each. Attached to its side is a knife, ready to be unsheathed for who knows what act of surgical cruelty. This masculine persona is very different from those suggested by the other works in the series. Here the daddy-in-the-basement is a psychopath constructing torture devices in the privacy of his suburban workshop.

Unlike Kelley's yarn works, these sculptures are the results of gender overkill. As he points out, they represent a diverse range of iconic male types, ultra-masculine but ham-handed. Like the men who inhabit Pettibon's drawings, the apparent creators of Kelley's contraptions are mired in inadequacy. They try in vain to be macho. Akin to McCarthy's bungling men, these characters seem to have misinterpreted the social roles assigned to them.

These three artists dislocate gender in similar ways, portraying it as a reenactment of culturally prescribed behaviors—as itself a form of "drag." While lampooning the resurgence of manliness in post-60s art and society, Kelley, McCarthy, and Pettibon expose the limitations of certain feminist practices, as well as the paradox of being male artists enlightened by just such practices. Indeed, their embrace of dysfunction, incongruity, and contradiction can be understood as a reflection of their own uncertain positions—their own underlying sense of inadequacy. These works are essentially caricatures of men trying to make art in the wake of feminism. Their tactics are unsatisfactory, and intentionally so. Going beyond the deconstruction of bankrupt categories, they suggest that the only appropriately complex understanding of gender involves a constant problematizing of the vocabulary used to discuss it. These artists are engaged less in gender bending per se than in a sort of gender dissolution or demolition, triggered by the grotesque misrepresentation or misperformance of its components—both the "feminine" and the "masculine."



1. John Wayne Gacy, *Pogo the Clown*, detail from Mike Kelley's *Pay for Your Pleasure*. 1988. Courtesy Kelley Studio, Inc.

2. Mike Kelley, *Pay
for Your Pleasure*,
1988. Courtesy Kelley
Studio, Inc.





TO KNOW THE WAY OF
THE WORLD IS TO KNOW
THE WAY OF THE
WIND

THE WORLD IS A
MIRROR OF THE
HEART

IF YOU ARE
A MAN OF
WISDOM,
YOU WILL
KNOW THE
WAY OF THE
WIND

IF YOU ARE
A MAN OF
WISDOM,
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GIOTTO

GREAT
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3. Paul McCarthy, *My Doctor*, 1978. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth.



4. Paul McCarthy, *Fear of Mannequins, Wig Heads, Hollywood Boulevard* (one image of a series), 1971. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth.

5. (Opposite) Paul McCarthy, *Hot Dog*, 1974. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth.





6. Paul McCarthy, *Tubbing*, 1975. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth.

7. Paul McCarthy, *Political Disturbance*, 1976. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth.





8. Mike Kelley, *Elegy to the Symbionese Liberation Army*, 1975. Courtesy Kelley Studio, Inc.

9. Mike Kelley, *Trash Picker*, 1987. Courtesy Kelley Studio, Inc.





10. Mike Kelley, *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid*, 1987. Courtesy Kelley Studio, Inc.; photograph by Douglas M. Parker.



11. Paul McCarthy, *Rocky*, 1976. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth.



12. Mike Kelley, *Kneading Board*, 1992. Courtesy Kelley Studio, Inc.; photograph by Fredrik Nilsen.

13. Mike Kelley, *Missing Time Color Exercise #6*, 1988. Courtesy Kelley Studio, Inc.



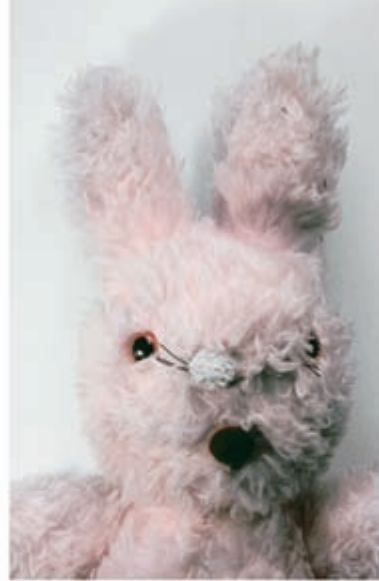


14. Paul McCarthy, *The Garden*, 1991-92. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth.

15. Paul McCarthy, *Cultural Gothic*, 1992. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth.







17. Mike Kelley, *Ahh...Youth!* 1991. Courtesy Kelley Studio, Inc.

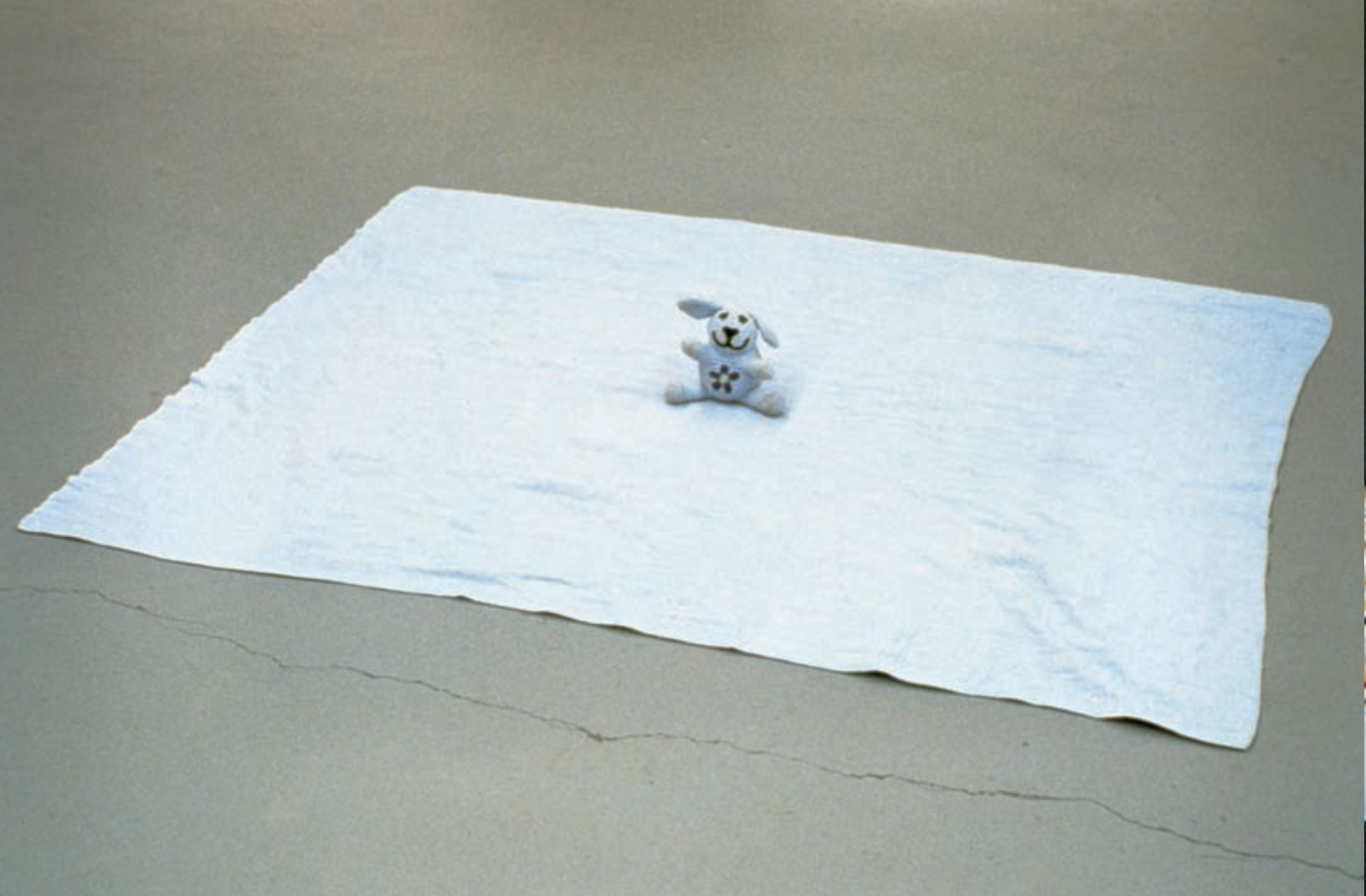
16. Mike Kelley, *Junior High Notebook Cover*, 1984. Courtesy Kelley Studio, Inc.



18. Mike Kelley, *Arena #5 (E.T.'s)*, 1990. Courtesy Kelley Studio, Inc.



19. Mike Kelley, *Arena #7 (Bears)*, 1990. Courtesy Kelley Studio, Inc.



20. Mike Kelley, *Arena #9 (Blue Bunny)*, 1990. Courtesy Kelley Studio, Inc.



21. Paul McCarthy, *Baby Boy, Baby Magic*, 1982. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth.





23. Paul McCarthy, *Tomato Heads*, 1994. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth;
Photograph by Douglas M. Parker.

22. Paul McCarthy, *Mother Pig*, 1983. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth.



24. Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy, *Heidi*, 1991. Courtesy Paul McCarthy and Hauser & Wirth and Kelley Studio, Inc.

FIVE

SEX PANIC

In a drawing from Pettibon's 1984 *Tripping Corpse Four* (fig. 5.1), a naked freckle-faced flower child grooves to the beat, her swooning body painted with psychedelic patterns and the phrase "Turn Me On." "MOTHER WOULD DIE . . . SIMPLY DIE!" she boasts with Locust Valley lockjaw affectation. Clutching a carving knife, she is a vision of counterculture demise—its spread to suburbia on the one hand and its skid into wanton violence on the other. Scrawled in blood on the wall behind her is "SHANG-A-LANG," the title of a syrupy 1974 pop song that confirms the hippie debutante's latecomer status while diluting the radical politics suggested by her painted nude body.¹ To align this song with erotic abandon is silly; to associate it with sadistic rapture is ridiculous. Pettibon's absurd mix of ecstatic carnage, vacuous music, and inane adolescent amusement renders "free love" both more perilous and more insipid than claimed. The drawing mocks the enduring belief that libidinal liberation can usher in sweeping social change.

The work of Kelley, McCarthy, and Pettibon routinely undercuts the politicization of sex and desire. Shaped by their general suspicion of socially constructed meaning, their views are rooted in the waning days of the counterculture period, when the commercialization of the sexual revolution seemed to confirm its sociopolitical impotence while emerging feminist and gay-rights movements exposed its heterocentric, patriarchal foundation. By the mid-1970s moment to which Pettibon's drawing alludes, white middle-class America had consumed its version of the revolution via a deluge of sex-advice books, erotic novels, sexually explicit theater, and soft-porn films—a fad that largely remained within traditional bounds of the normal and acceptable.² *Deep Throat* (1972) may have made audiences feel naughty, but the film was an exclusively male heterosexual fantasy. Masters and Johnson promoted monogamy, heterosexuality, and marriage, as did the host of guidebooks they inspired.³ In 1975 *Newsweek* columnist Bob Greene noted that marvels such as wife-swapping and orgies had become "such old topics of suburban patio conversation that they are now considered somewhat dreary."⁴ Less a catalyst for rebellion than a sign of bourgeois urbanity, "liberation" had apparently come without the cultural transformation prophesied by proponents and alarmists alike.⁵

A profound shift in the discourse on sex coincided with this letdown. In *Sexual Conduct: The Social Sources of Human Sexuality* (1973), sociologists John H. Gagnon and William Simon challenged the Freudian opposition between "natural" desire and "cultural" repression—an opposition upheld both by conservatives who argued for the necessity of the latter and by progressives who sought the emancipation of the former. Gagnon and Simon instead focused on "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



51.
Raymond Pettibon, No
Title (Mother would
die), 1984. *Tripping
Corpse Four*, p.
19. Courtesy Regen
Projects, Los Angeles
© Raymond Pettibon.

come together to create sexual conduct.”⁶ They argued that desire and arousal are themselves socially conditioned. “It is only our insistence on the myth of naturalness that hides these social components from us.”⁷ Abandoning an entrenched nature-culture binary, Gagnon and Simon turned from the benefits and detriments of institutionalized repression to the terms in which sex is thought about and talked about. To them, modern Western culture grants sexuality an inflated status, which

not only assures sufficient reproductive activity but provides incentives for stability and order in the nonsexual areas of social life.⁸ (Hugh Hefner intuited this a decade earlier when he promoted *Playboy* as “a publication that helps motivate a part of society to work harder, to accomplish more, to earn more.”)⁹ Gagnon and Simon’s “social constructionist” approach was reinforced by Michel Foucault’s broadly influential *History of Sexuality*, published in English in the late 1970s and established as a core “postmodern” text in the 80s and 90s.¹⁰ Foucault too saw the focus on repression as a canard, arguing that it is discourse that maintains social power structures. The explosion of sex talk in the 1960s and 1970s inevitably, if inadvertently, enhanced this system of control. “The irony of this,” Foucault concluded, “is in having us believe that our ‘liberation’ is in the balance.”¹¹

Despite this theoretical shift, American attitudes toward sex generally seemed to calcify in the post-60s era. The culture wars of the 1980s and 90s were fought along traditional lines—normal and abnormal, healthy and unhealthy, natural and unnatural, moral and immoral—reinforced by a contentious and increasingly prominent public dialogue surrounding AIDS. Sex was now both commonplace and deadly, yet decades-old debates continued to dominate. Conservatives launched a sexual counterrevolution aimed at restoring reproduction as the sole purpose of sex and neutralizing the “moral relativism” seen as the lasting legacy of the 1960s. Allan Bloom 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.¹² Such indictments were fueled by a host of “sex panics” in the 1980s, battles over not only AIDS but also adolescent promiscuity and pregnancy, gay rights, sex education, contraception, abortion, graphic sex and violence in popular media, and the public funding of “obscene” art.¹³ Such panics further inflated the apparent social significance of sex, bolstering what Gayle Rubin called “the domino theory of sexual peril,” the contention that excessive or “immoral” sex—that is, anything but heterosexual procreative marital intercourse—would lead to the breakdown of society and the decline of Western civilization.¹⁴ Conservative writer Norman Podhoretz thus blamed homosexuality for America’s alleged inability to stand up to the Soviets.¹⁵ Yet some of these newfound sex issues—disease and teen pregnancy, for example—also posed real and unavoidable challenges to liberationist views, as did the increased attention given to sexual abuse, domestic violence, pedophilia, and rape at the time. As Sharon Thompson noted in 1984, many progressives simply reverted to a “too much, too soon” position or discussed sex chiefly as “a source of victimization rather than of pleasure.”¹⁶

For others, social constructionist theory allowed for the repoliticization of sex in the late 1970s and 80s. The Foucauldian view of sex as a reification of patriarchal power meant that a refusal of “normalcy” could function as a form of dissent. Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin’s mid-80s antipornography crusade was couched, for instance, in a more general condemnation of sexual intercourse itself, understood as an expression of male domination, of “penile power.”¹⁷ To them, the sexual revolution had only further subordinated women. In his 1987 article “Is the Rectum a Grave?,” Leo Bersani denounced this criminalization of sex as an overextension of an otherwise valid social constructionist model. However, in attempting to shift attention from “the expression of politics in sex” to “the extremely obscure process by which sexual pleasure *generates* politics,” Bersani

argued that a reversal of patriarchal mastery can be achieved by men who submit themselves to anal penetration.¹⁸ Sex was still cast as a political act, the penis a political tool.

Thus, while the forces of sexual repression and suppression were aligning on behalf of a reinvigorated Right, the Left was splintering into rival factions, each advancing a divergent notion of emancipation and how best to achieve it. The very meaning of sex was thrown into crisis. Unsatisfied with the solutions offered, sexual “pluralists” such as Rubin and Jeffrey Weeks sought a progressive approach that abandoned this “discourse of emancipation.” As Weeks observed: “Many feminists regarded the sexual liberationists of the 1960s as having increased the burden of sexual oppression on women. And not many people have been prepared to support the emancipatory potential of the pedophile movement. More often than not, the social movements claiming emancipatory potential tend to represent the militant particularism of some rather than a social emancipation for all.”¹⁹ Pluralists pursued a more expansive approach, calling for tolerance and relativism, for a leveling of the “sex hierarchy” that privileges certain erotic acts and desires over others.²⁰ Seeking middle ground between the idea of sex as a bearer of power relations and the liberationist theory popularized previously, theirs was a no less political, if less radical, offshoot of social constructionist theory. Acceptance of diversity and freedom of choice would supposedly bring an end to sexual domination and subordination.²¹

Several works by Kelley, McCarthy, and Pettibon can be understood in relation to this post-60s “crisis of sexual meanings,” as Weeks termed it in 1985.²² However, these artists show deep skepticism toward the possibility of freedom—sexual or otherwise. The characters portrayed in their work routinely appear trapped within a rigid discourse on sexuality; the illusion of “choice” is not only restrictive but destructive. If these artists assume what might be termed a Foucauldian point of view—and, indeed, many of their works reveal the very processes by which sex is constructed—they appear suspicious of its application, of its politicization on behalf of a particular cause. Sexual discourse may in fact be the essential problem, but by the 1980s it seemed that social constructionism had led to an expansion of that very discourse. In the introductory essay to the 1992 anthology *Discourses of Sexuality*, Domna Stanton noted that the previous decade had witnessed an unprecedented politicization of sexual issues, a fact that she partially blames on the inability of progressives to establish a legitimate stance from which to combat the dominance of the Right. From Stanton’s early-90s standpoint, Foucault’s position was certainly groundbreaking but also idealistic and fundamentally contradictory: “he made a voluminous contribution to studies of sexuality while condemning ‘perpetual discourse’ on sex; he placed sex at the center of an analysis while striving to demystify its cultural significance.”²³

Whereas the work of Kelley, McCarthy, and Pettibon openly challenges sexual norms, it actively resists the fantasy of a new order—whether it be the radical reshuffling of power relations advocated by Dworkin or Bersani, the pluralism of Weeks and Rubin, or the return to traditional morality promoted by a surging conservative movement. Though these artists may not have read those theorists per se, their art reflects the diffusion of such ideas into the broader mass culture. It also correlates with their simultaneously emerging engagement with gender. Re-

deploying clichés and perverting norms and ideals, Kelley, McCarthy, and Pettibon likewise magnify the incoherence of America’s overly sexualized cultural politics and overly politicized sexual politics. They tap the social significance, and allure, of sex only to deflate its discourse. To them, sex is neither something to defend nor something to restrict. The best way to deal with recent conceptual and ideological shifts, their work suggests, is to vigorously disrupt the presumed and overemphasized link between sex and politics, to expose contradictions within dogmatic positions, to render sexual discourse banal, absurd, impotent—approaches that are, of course, political gambits in and of themselves.

Since the mid-1970s, McCarthy has spotlighted the socially conditioned “nature” of sexuality and the power relations such conditioning both maintains and obscures. His works have presented sex not as good or evil, progressive or regressive, but as complex, contradictory, and contrived. Pettibon’s vision is both bleaker and more pointed. As in the 1984 work with which this chapter opens, his drawings reveal the seamy sides of sex while openly caricaturing its politicization, past and present. Pettibon not only demystifies conventional sexual politics, he indicts it. Kelley similarly addresses this politicization, exposing hypocrisies on both the Right and Left through a series of mock social programs and absurdist sex sculptures. All three artists treat the romanticization and demonization of sex as mutually reaffirming and equally misguided. Their sex smashups complicate the categories by which we classify erotic desires and behaviors, along with the system of mores and taboos that maintains those classifications.

EDIBLE EROTICA, POST-PORNOTOPIAN PERFORMANCES, AND SEX TO SEXTY

McCarthy’s 1975 video *Sailor’s Meat* (fig. 1.3) is based on a publicity still from Russ Meyer’s 1963 sexploitation film *Europe in the Raw!*²⁴ Done up in black lace lingerie, heavy makeup, and a seductive expression, the artist performs as the film’s female protagonist, meandering across the room and methodically exposing different body parts, accentuated by tightly cropped close-ups. Replete with standard symbols of salaciousness—seedy motel room, musty lighting, squeaky bed, implicit voyeurism—the scene is conventionally kinky, sleazy in an entirely porn-traditional way. Yet the work quickly deviates from this sexual cliché. Having thrust a hot dog up his ass and smeared himself with ketchup, McCarthy positions himself on all fours and “goes down on” a slab of glistening raw meat, burying his face in it, taking it in his teeth, drooling and spitting on it, and finally rubbing it over his body. He then adds ground beef to the mix, spreading it across the bed along with the steak, hot dogs, and ketchup, and thrusting his body back and forth with increasing agitation, as if simultaneously humping and being humped by it. Such antics continue for nearly forty-five minutes.

Inane and idiotic, *Sailor’s Meat* satirizes the contention that consuming sexually explicit materials can be subversive. The work’s extreme anti-aesthetic and revolting misuse of substances render it a turnoff rather than a turn-on, rupturing the fantasy. It also stands in direct confrontation with certain body and performance artists who had recently offered staged physical release as a path toward real sociopolitical transformation. In Carolee Schneemann’s orgiastic *Meat Joy* (1964), for example, a group of near-naked men and women rolled around on the floor,

rubbing raw fish, chickens, sausages, wet paint, and other materials on each other in a defiant and transcendentalist ritual of erotic abandon. Schneemann's explicit goal was freedom from repression, and her audience was deliberately positioned close to the performance so as to share in its emancipatory powers.²⁵ This kind of work was directly linked to the sexual politics of the 1960s, and indeed *Meat Joy* has been interpreted an outgrowth of Herbert Marcuse's theory of a radical counter-culture in which overcoming repression is a means of bringing down the establishment.²⁶ For Schneemann, physical contact with fleshy substances and bare bodies would lead to expanded mystical consciousness, erotic freedom, and, in the end, social change. A decade later, McCarthy revisited issues raised by such performances, but from a decidedly disenchanted perspective.²⁷ Whereas *Meat Joy* was meant to be visceral, communal, celebratory, and authentic, *Sailor's Meat* is private (masturbatory), deranged, and detached, this last effect enhanced by the use of video instead of live performance. Both works involved apparent indulgences of desire, but McCarthy's is devoid of therapeutic intentions. Schneemann invited her viewers to participate in a collective liberation; McCarthy baits his viewer into a situation of psychological, perceptual, and moral ambiguity.

Sailor's Meat marks a transition from the seemingly defunct liberationism of the 1960s and early 70s to the nascent constructionism of the late 1970s and 1980s. Yet whereas McCarthy's work certainly involves a sociological approach, it preempts the repoliticization of sex that to some had been made possible by that approach. While McCarthy was producing such work, Susan Brownmiller was arguing that the power relations underlying sexual activity make even the supposedly benign forms of heterosexual sex akin to rape. Her influential 1975 book *Against Our Will* led the way to the 1980s activism of Dworkin and MacKinnon.²⁸ At the cusp of a post-sexual-revolution world of no less intense sexual politics, McCarthy destabilizes those very politics—past, present, and future.

His primary tactic is to explicitly align sex consumption with food consumption. The acute sense of revulsion triggered by McCarthy's transgressions reveals just how off-putting this alignment can be. Yet that response stems from more than simply hard-wired disapproval. As Mary Douglas points out, such transgressions can be profoundly threatening, because taboos—whether food- or sex-oriented—belong to a fundamental symbolic system, a “total structure of thought” dependent on clear and stable categories essential to the conventions, institutions, and relations of a particular society.²⁹ The intentional violation of this structure is disturbing because it denies the authority of the symbolic system itself, hinting at its artificiality and its fragility while revealing the indispensable role such a system plays in maintaining social order. In McCarthy's work this effect is amplified by the implication that his assertive, self-conscious acts of regression are part of highly deliberate, if exotic, personal routines—suggesting an alternative order in which seemingly “natural” bodily norms do not apply. According to psychologist Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, this type of staged regression—a deliberate return to the “anal-sadistic phase” in which basic categories of identity and distinctions between generations are dissolved—is the very essence of perversion.³⁰ Similarly, Julia Kristeva argues that abject substances and acts activate a momentary return to a primal psychological state, threatening one's sense of self and the social-symbolic order that constitutes it.³¹ Kristeva combines Douglas's approach to systems with

Georges Bataille's notion of *l'informe*, also rooted in a disruption of order via the dissolution of categories. In fact, Bataille places particular significance on rituals of self-abuse, which he claims "have the power to liberate heterogeneous elements and to break the habitual homogeneity of the individual, in the same way that vomiting would be opposed to its opposite, the communal eating of food."³²

Whereas such theories certainly resonate in McCarthy's work, they do not account for the social significance of his references, particularly in a post-60s American context of not only commercialized sex, but increasingly sexualized commerce. Though instituted in the 1960s, the use of erotic imagery and innuendo to sell products fully flowered in the 1970s.³³ It also became more and more nuanced. For example, overeating or eating the wrong (i.e., fattening) foods—already recognized as generally bad—began to be represented in advertisements as risqué or "naughty," as occasional (sexually) satisfying indulgences.³⁴ In their history of American sexuality John D'Emilio and Estelle Friedman point out that the entanglement of sex and commerce that arose at this time "placed the weight of capitalist institutions on the side of visible public presence for the erotic," and as a result, "political movements based on sexual issues alone, whether of the Right or the Left, faced huge obstacles."³⁵ Conservative defenders of capitalism thus had to grapple with its explicit sexualization, while liberal advocates of sexual freedom had to contend with its overt commercialization.

If McCarthy's abject violations can be linked to a certain tradition of scatological art, his engagement with consumerism belongs to the lineage of pop art. His principal materials—hot dogs and hamburger meat; ketchup, mayonnaise, and yellow mustard—are patently American, the favorites of American children and staples of American cupboards, lunchboxes, and family barbecues. Like the Campbell's Soup used by Andy Warhol, the common foods that McCarthy features are emblematic of broad cultural values, edible icons of Americana that are not only mass produced but symbolic of mass production and consumption themselves. Their symbolism both complements and complicates his work.³⁶ *Sailor's Meat* does more than upend sexual norms and fundamental ideals of bodily behavior. It expressly identifies American consumerism as the system sustained by those norms and ideals. (In this sense the condiments McCarthy repeatedly features are especially meaningful, for they make archetypal American foods more flavorful, easier to swallow. They are mediums of ingestion—quite literally lubricants for the mechanics of American consumption.)

These works followed a defining period not only in American sexuality but in US food production and consumption—which also explains pop's persistent focus on the subject in the 1960s. By the mid-1970s cooking schools were springing up all over the country, cooking shows had made celebrities out of chefs like Graham Kerr (the *Gallopington Gourmet*) and Julia Child, gourmet shops had proliferated, and the American restaurant scene had exploded. Dining and grocery shopping seemed ever more consequential too, as activists aligned mass-produced food with worker exploitation and imperialism and consumers became more aware of the dangers of pesticides, chemical fertilizers, and fillers.³⁷ Noncorporate food markets and macrobiotic, organic, and vegetarian diets became popular forms of counterculture resistance. As Harvey Levenstein points out in his history of eating in the United States, this move toward alternative modes of eating was bound up with America's

more general obsession with food and filth. “A constant theme in counterculture thinking about food,” Levenstein explains, “was the necessity to purge oneself of the dirty things modern eating put into one’s system.”³⁸ Mainstream Americans were also focusing more on nutrition and dieting at this time, and, like sexual openness, appetite control and food erudition increasingly became signs of bourgeois sophistication. (Alex Comfort capitalized on this convergence, modeling his 1972 best seller *The Joy of Sex: A Cordon Bleu Guide to Lovemaking* on the cookbook, divided into “Starters,” “Main Courses,” and “Sauces and Pickles.”)³⁹ Where food is especially abundant, “bad” eating is that done solely for pleasure, in excess. With the exception of designated times and places in which stuffing oneself is acceptable—Thanksgiving, for example—overeating is a primary taboo, enforced through a ratcheting up of self-regulation and social pressure seemingly at odds with the American capitalist compulsion to overconsume. By the early 70s, this tortuous antimony between restraint and indulgence, between self-control and emotional satisfaction, was set; since then it has only expanded and intensified.⁴⁰ Normalcy has become a state of perpetual conflict, as individuals are torn between the ceaseless drive to consume, perpetuated by ever more invasive and unrelenting marketing strategies, and the need for restraint, imposed by ever more intricate social norms.

McCarthy’s approach evokes two competing sociological theories of contemporary consumption—theories that not only informed, and continue to inform, the evaluation of pop art but that had particular resonance in the mid-1970s, when he first turned his attention to food and sex. On the one hand, the explosion of mass production in the 1960s has been seen as having dissolved the rigidity and restrictiveness of consumption patterns, ushering in an age of individualization and informalization, of increased freedom and a loosening of social-status divisions via the staggering array of product choices available to virtually everyone, everywhere.⁴¹ As Warhol famously observed, “What’s great about this country is that America started the tradition where the richest consumers buy essentially the same things as the poorest. You can be watching TV and see Coca-Cola, and you know that the President drinks Coke, Liz Taylor drinks Coke, and just think, you can drink Coke, too.”⁴² Whereas such statements can hardly be taken at face value, the cultural politics of pop generally involved an affirmation of mass production and consumption, at least in terms of their standardizing potential, their ability to level class hierarchies and thus contest the status of (high) art.⁴³

On the other hand, this leveling effect has been dismissed as a grand illusion. Mass production and consumption are here seen as generators of extreme homogenization, of uniformity and social control under the guise of democratization—what George Ritzer has called the “McDonaldization of society.”⁴⁴ Like the expansion of sexual choice and access, the abundance of products now offered in supermarkets has been understood as reinforcing, rather than challenging, power structures. As Zygmunt Bauman argues, consumer society is founded upon this illusory “freedom of choice,” which compensates for new constraints. “The search for freedom,” Bauman contends, “is reinterpreted as the effort to satisfy consumer needs through appropriation of marketable goods.” Yet this satisfaction is always fleeting: appetites must remain insatiable for the system to perpetuate itself; consumers must always want more. The endless quest for freedom through consumption not only ensures continued economic growth but imprisons the individual

within the system, within his or her own desires. Overconsumption is therefore the key to social stability, achieved through unceasing individual crisis. This impossible but inescapable condition is, Bauman claims, “the major structural fault generative of an ever increasing scale of contradictions which ultimately this kind of society is incapable of solving.”⁴⁵

In McCarthy’s world, eating and sex are not only excessive and perverse but compulsive. Eroticized force-feeding is a metaphor for American (over)consumption in the general, economic-materialist sense, and for the imprisonment of the individual, the forcible inculcation of consumer values by a society in which not only is sex for sale but consumption itself is often equated with sexual satisfaction. *Sailor’s Meat* is the culmination of several early- to mid-70s performances in which McCarthy rendered explicit the erotic undertones of consumption. In *Tubbing* (1975; plate 6) he sat in a bathtub and performed oral sex on a sausage; in *Meat Cake* (1974) he used mayonnaise and margarine as masturbatory lubricants; in *Heinz Ketchup Sauce* (1974) he performed an extraordinary range of sexual activities with a bottle of ketchup. These works suggest the intractability of a social order sustained to a large extent by the intricacies of food rules and sex rules, a message with particular relevance in the wake of the 1960s, when both material and sexual consumption had been associated with liberation. In McCarthy’s world, desire is not only socially constructed but stimulated—indeed, overstimulated—by an all-encompassing American consumer culture whose objective is, as Bauman explains, “not to develop the suppressed capacity of erotic sensuality, but to drill a body into the capacity of going over and over again the codified routine of sexual acts.”⁴⁶ McCarthy’s protagonists appear so possessed by their sexual and gastronomic compulsions that all other concerns, including their own physical well-being, fall by the wayside.

Both sex and eating not only depend on elaborate self-regulated sets of protocols that determine appropriate times, places, and persons but are controlled by a marketing industry that stimulates desires that are then restrained by the limits of propriety. Again, McCarthy’s choice of unmistakably American foods is especially meaningful: founded as it is upon an improbable mix of capitalist consumption and puritan moderation, American culture is arguably more contradictory in this regard than any other.⁴⁷ And as Mary Douglas makes clear, the greater the internal contradiction within a particular social system, the more sacred its naturalized protocols and the more dangerous their violation.⁴⁸ Indeed, the marketing industry is intimately aware of the fragility of the symbolic system, of how fine the line between enticement and offense truly is. Food and sex can tolerably be mixed, but only under certain conditions and in certain contexts, which explains why eroticized food advertisements—or cookbook-style sex guides—are perceived as not only acceptable but ordinary while McCarthy’s food-fucking is almost unbearably offensive. Divisions between what is considered “bodily” and what is not are also essential. Meat is particularly significant here, since consumer culture disembodies it by concealing its corporeal origins—whether through common advertisements or supermarket packaging—only to then reembody it by sexualizing food consumption. Taking the entrenched metaphors of routine marketing at face value, McCarthy’s buffoonish persona literally has sex with his groceries, exposing the instability and fluidity of the seemingly eternal and unambiguous categories that allow material satisfaction to be safely aligned with sexual satisfaction.

His transgressions are fundamentally taxonomic. The conversion of meats and condiments into body parts and grossly sexualized fluids prompts a destabilization of signs, as mainstream materials are rendered marginal. Ketchup becomes blood, mayonnaise semen, and meat genitalia through processes of simple displacement. McCarthy's grotesque confections reflect a twofold strategy of dislocation and relocation by which he coaxes viewers to draw lines and make distinctions that are then rendered problematic, disrupting the process of placing meaning upon particular substances and behaviors. Indeed, McCarthy always renders the true identities of his materials obvious—the ketchup is taken directly from its bottle, the mayo from its jar, the meat from its shrink-wrapped package—and viewers consequently oscillate between mutually exclusive readings: mayo as cum, mayo as mayo; deviant sexuality on the one hand, wholesome Americana on the other. Evoking both the supermarket aisle and the porn shop but at home in neither, works such as *Sailor's Meat* emphasize the contingent nature of the erotic and the fact that perversity is not some intrinsic state of being but rather the result of “matter out of place,” to use Douglas's term.⁴⁹ As Gagnon and Simon made clear in the mid-1970s, this introduction of sexuality where it does not belong is profoundly problematic because it constitutes “a violation of the expected social arrangement.”⁵⁰ McCarthy's quotidian foods work to desexualize his performance, while his explicit sexual acts render those same foods disgusting.

Collapsing sexualized commerce and commercialized sex, *Sailor's Meat* responds to the post-60s depoliticization and repoliticization of sex, and in particular pornography, which was being safely consumed by the middle class yet still the subject of a contentious public discourse at this time.⁵¹ In September 1970 the Presidential Commission on Pornography released a seven-hundred-page report documenting its growing visibility and questioning the efficacy of state-enforced censorship. Concluding that explicit materials have “little or no effect” on behavior, attitudes, and morality—sexual or otherwise—the commission recommended a repeal of legislation designed to censor those materials.⁵² President Nixon refused to accept the report's findings, pledging 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 our national life.”⁵³ If progressives saw the influx of pornography as an endorsement of open sexuality, conservatives generally agreed, though they dreaded such an outcome rather than celebrating it. Both sides ascribed to a “domino theory”—a fact recognized a few years earlier by Susan Sontag, who noted in her 1967 essay “The Pornographic Imagination” that both the Left and the Right saw pornography as socially and culturally disruptive, a threat to Christian mores and traditional family values.⁵⁴ Sontag's point was soon confirmed by Nixon, who reasoned that “an attitude of permissiveness . . . would increase the threat to our social order as well as to our moral principles.”⁵⁵ In the 1980s the antipornography coalition forged between certain feminists and moral conservatives reinforced this alignment.⁵⁶ What had initially been presented as a clear-cut issue between freedom and repression had thus become a tangle of contradictory positions and strange bedfellows.⁵⁷ Remaining largely uncontested, however, was the notion that sexually explicit material directly affects actual behavior.

Sailor's Meat drains such material of its presumed agency. After again dousing himself with his meat mixture—at each juncture it seems to serve as some

sort of sexual stimulant—McCarthy violently pulls on a rubber phallus taped to his crotch, yanking it as hard as he can and yelping in feigned agony. Then, with increasing ferocity, he repeatedly jams this prosthetic into a mayonnaise jar while convulsing and retching. His self-mutilation is obviously fake, and yet the scene remains excruciating to behold. The work's gender layering, discussed in chapter 4, enhances this confusion. Is the protagonist a man at war with his own member or a woman with a strap-on taking vengeance on the primary symbol of patriarchy? *Sailor's Meat* operates against the glorification of the penis by “porno chic” movies—including those of Russ Meyer—and by the counterculture movement's largely male-oriented sex-liberationist rhetoric. Yet McCarthy's work is distinct from the decidedly political phallic work of his predecessors—not only feminists but anti-war artists as well. Wally Hedrick's 1959 painting *Anger*, often cited as one of the first artistic responses to American policy in Vietnam, represents military intervention as a large brown penis penetrating a red vagina-heart, which together form a mushroom cloud.⁵⁸ Nancy Spero's 1968 *The Bomb* similarly aligns the male organ with warfare and destruction, featuring two blood-spewing phalluses extending from the crotch of a mushroom cloud-headed man. Such imagery is meant to be both metaphoric and literal: not only is the penis a symbol of patriarchy, but the male heterosexual drive is incriminated as the underlying generator of imperialism, violence, and domination. According to Brownmiller the penis is literally a weapon of physical, psychological, and political subjugation. The root of oppression is thus located in the body of a universal man whose havoc-wreaking tendency is biologically preordained—the natural and inevitable result of testosterone. McCarthy's repeated portrayal of the penis as limp, feminized, and inept—whether in his mid-70s *Rocky* parody and drag performances or in later sculptures such as the 1993 *Spaghetti Man*, to be discussed in the next chapter—undermines this essentialist association with power and subordination, while shifting attention to the social construction of sexuality. Viewers are therefore left unsure of the artist's motives; as Barbara Smith noted in 1979 about McCarthy's use of the phallus in *Sailor's Meat*, “it was difficult to tell whether he was fixing the symbol or gouging it.”⁵⁹ Caricaturing both the cock-reviling feminist and the cock-wielding enforcer of patriarchy, the work is not only an epitome of uncertain masculinity in the post-60s era. It is a mockery of penile politics at large.

McCarthy's approach echoes and enhances that of Vito Acconci, an early McCarthy influence whose performances and videos offered similar demythologizations of sex. In *Seedbed* (1972) Acconci masturbated under the floor of his gallery while calling out to visitors as if they were lovers. In the 1972 video *Undertone* he rubs himself under a table while relating a sexual fantasy, at times talking to himself, at others addressing the camera.⁶⁰ Like Schneemann, Acconci sexualized the relationship between performer and viewer. But rather than being led toward physical and spiritual emancipation, Acconci's spectator becomes an accomplice in acts of dubious moral standing. No longer a safe observer, he or she is repositioned as either voyeur or fellow deviant. Refusing the utopian aspirations of his contemporaries, Acconci suggested that sexuality is as much an outgrowth of social relations as it is a pure expression of idealized instinct. McCarthy built upon this anti-idealist approach, responding not only to the glorification and demonization of sex but also to the widespread commercialization of it—the sense that it had become

“prepackaged” just like the supermarket meats he abuses. He further implicates the viewer, transforming the art consumer into a porn consumer.

For McCarthy, it seems, social constructionism constitutes a repudiation rather than an expansion of sexual politics. His performances and videos from this period attest to the continued authority of society’s systems of classification and order. That his ridiculous behaviors—which, incidentally, are neither hostile nor particularly hazardous—could still elicit extreme revulsion confirmed the lasting power of these systems despite the supposed “liberation” of both art and popular culture.

Devoid of virtue, McCarthy’s protagonists seem utterly incapable of controlling their own desires. They expose the underpinnings of a social system of conditioned behaviors and responses, but they themselves seem forever trapped by that very system. McCarthy appears to have rejected what Leo Bersani later referred to as “the redemptive reinvention of sex,” a fundamentally utopian objective suggested by the radical feminism of Brownmiller, Dworkin, and MacKinnon as well as by the sexual pluralism of Weeks, Rubin, and others.⁶¹ To treat sex as a privileged site of resistance or oppression is to cling to the hope for some pure form of sex, uncontaminated by power relations.⁶² McCarthy’s work implies that sex is not just connected to social relations; it is a social relation—a convergence of prescribed symbols, situations, and gestures identified as “sexual” according to categories that may seem stable and clear-cut but that are in fact fundamentally unstable and ambiguous. Anything, even ketchup, can be sexualized if set within the proper—or, in this case, improper—context. (This realization is, in fact, closer to Gagnon and Simon’s original assertion.) McCarthy’s works reveal not only how off-putting sexual transgressions can be but also how ineffective such transgressions are as politics.

Dislocating the underlying categories that allow for the compartmentalization of the sexual within the social—categories that allow us to distinguish the sexual from the nonsexual, the dirty from the clean—thus becomes a political gesture in and of itself. Again, pornography is key, since it depends on the illusion of social deviance, the belief that such material is subversive when in fact all evidence points to the contrary. As Steven Marcus points out in his groundbreaking 1964 study of the subject, pornography has always been founded upon a modern bourgeois fantasy of permissiveness, a “pornotopia” that resides solely within “the infinite, barren, yet plastic space that exists within our skulls.”⁶³ In his 1987 examination, Walter Kendrick links the word itself to modernity’s unique penchant for categorization. While what would eventually be deemed pornographic had existed for centuries, the term did not surface until around 1850. Its invention was, Kendrick explains, the solution to a crisis in classification, stemming from the then-recent discovery of sexually explicit antiquities at Pompeii. Whereas the Romans, it seemed, could combine everyday life with obscenity, Victorian moderns could not, and as a result a new taxonomy was required, along with a new name. To disrupt that taxonomy—by, for example, rendering the marginal mainstream, the dirty clean—is 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 the open and legal publication of risqué material would generate a paradigm shift so profound that pornography itself would be rendered obsolete. “We are coming to the end of the era,” Marcus

reasoned, “in which pornography had a historical meaning and even a historical function.”⁶⁴

This shift apparently came, but without the social revolution it was supposed to herald. As Kendrick later explained, the extensive reexamination of pornography in the late 60s and early 70s—its popularization and demystification—had ushered in a new period in its history: a “post-pornographic” era in which pornography was no longer really “pornographic.”⁶⁵ By treating its supposed subversiveness as contrived, its forms and standards as cliché, McCarthy’s video suggests that the category had indeed lost its function. Yet in reality the normalization of pornography seemed to have no concrete effect on its implicit claims to deviancy. Not only did both liberals and conservatives have a vested interest in maintaining the myth of “the risqué,” but so of course did the burgeoning porn industry, along with the entire system of commercialized sex and sexualized commerce—from hard-core films to sex guides to everyday advertisements. As Peter Sloterdijk pointed out in 1983, while pornography had long ago exhausted its aggressive bite, the industry continues to flourish by labeling something dirty that it knows no longer is. Contemporary pornography is fundamentally and cynically duplicitous. “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.”⁶⁶ The essential contradiction here is the perseverance of pornography in a postpornographic age. A harbinger of that age, *Sailor’s Meat* shifts attention from heated debates over repression, suppression, and oppression to the more fundamental issue of classification. The work anticipates Kendrick’s contention that “‘pornography’ names an argument, not a thing.”⁶⁷

McCarthy’s approach can be compared to Jeff Koons’s later *Made in Heaven* series (1989–91), which also draws attention to the incongruity of postpornographic pornography. In sculptures and photographic prints and paintings, Koons portrayed himself and his then-wife, porn star cum Italian parliamentarian Ilona Staller, engaged in a range of explicit sexual acts. Set in Disney-like fairytale settings or baroque alien-planet dreamscapes, these works are so self-consciously sensationalist and hyperkitschy that they simply cannot function as erotica. In *Ilona on Top* (*Rosa Background*), for example, the heavily made-up couple is laid out on a pink satin bed amid giant fluttering butterflies against an airbrushed backdrop. If *Sailor’s Meat* heralded the postpornographic era, *Made in Heaven* is perhaps its crassest reflection. Like McCarthy, Koons cheapens porn conventions to such a degree that they can no longer sustain themselves. Whereas McCarthy dislodges those conventions through fragmentation, disorientation, and grotesque contradiction, Koons exaggerates them to expose their utterly banality. Whereas McCarthy fouls up the pornotopian fantasy, Koons renders it sterile. Both artists aggressively challenge the viewer’s sense of propriety and taste, and both underscore the extreme commercialization of sex, portraying truly unpornographic pornography. McCarthy and Koons also make explicit use of their own bodies in ways that challenge more sincere forms of body art, prominent at the time of *Sailor’s Meat* and resurgent at the time of *Made in Heaven*.

In their collaborative video project *Fresh Acconci* (1995), McCarthy and Kelley

similarly address such body-art trends. The artists remade five of Vito Acconci's early-1970s works: *Claim Excerpts* (1971), *Contacts* (1971), *Focal Point* (1971), *Pryings* (1971), and *ThemeSong* (1973). Their renditions are faithful yet filtered through an incongruously beautified aesthetic. Acconci's grainy black-and-white production, bare studio settings, ratty furniture, and imperfect physique are thus replaced by rich color, dramatic lighting, and unblemished nude models performing in a luxurious California mansion. Reidealizing works originally designed to counter idealization, Kelley and McCarthy reversed Acconci's gambit. If pornography was raised to the level of an art in the 1970s, art itself appeared, to them at least, increasingly pornographic in the 1990s. As Kelley explains, their remakes "present the Acconci of the '70s through an approach to the body common in the art world of the '90s." What was once a strategy of critique had come to function as "a specialized subcultural erotica for the artworld despite what could be construed as its deconstructive pretensions."⁶⁸ Not only was sexual explicitness not revolutionary; it now seemed to reinforce the status quo. Drawing attention to this situation, *Fresh Acconci* insinuates that the lessons of Acconci's work have not been heeded by a younger generation that often cites him as an influence. To Kelley and McCarthy, art that features beautiful naked bodies in the name of avant-gardism represents an ill-conceived return to outdated ideas. Two decades after *Sailor's Meat*, things had apparently come full circle. Art itself seemed pornotopian.

Kelley independently returned to the subject of pornography and its relationship to art in his 1998 *Missing Time Color Exercise* series (plate 13), which incorporates actual examples of the popularized pornography to which McCarthy responded more two decades earlier. These works are constructed from Kelley's personal collection of *Sex to Sixty* magazines, vulgar comic books published between 1965 and 1983. Kelley arranged the magazine covers, each typically adorned with a half-witted sex-joke cartoon, chronologically into grids, with colored rectangles standing in for missing issues from his collection.⁶⁹ *Sex to Sixty* was, he explains, "one of the first pieces of erotica I ever saw."⁷⁰ 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*."⁷¹ *Sex to Sixty* was a product of pornography's shift to the mainstream—and the more general alignment of sex and commerce—in the late 1960s and early 70s, and yet, as Kelley points out, this "bible of hick erotica . . . 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."⁷²

By setting this example of unpornographic pornography within a gridded framework, Kelley deliberately draws a parallel between cheap, watered-down erotica and modernist art. The magazine covers are here reconceived in formalist terms, as components in an abstract "color exercise." The monochrome panels interspersed throughout the composition were chosen, Kelley explains, "to match particular colors present in the magazine covers, or to represent colors intermediate between those found in surrounding issues."⁷³ This "color exercise" recalls both his mid-70s student paintings, whose instigations similarly involve the use of provocative imagery as basic form, and his late-80s and early-90s stuffed doll works,

which, as will be discussed, resexualize the decidedly desexualized. In *Missing Time* he conflates the formal and conceptual integrity of “high” abstractionism and the contaminated cartoonish aesthetic of “low” sex humor. In his 1989 essay “Foul Perfection: Thoughts on Caricature,” Kelley draws attention to the underlying similarities between these supposed opposites. Both, he argues, are products of the same modernist Platonism that seeks to reduce a subject to its core essence. Referencing Walter Kendrick’s then-recent study, Kelley laments the ghettoization of more marginal forms—caricature, grotesque imagery, pornography—into realms distinct from “pure” Vitruvian abstraction linked to a puritanical “aesthetics of morality.” To Kelley, this morality is founded on the elimination of the erotic, a supposedly repugnant residue of “primitive” culture, from everyday life.⁷⁴ It also runs counter to art, which he understands as essentially an “intellectual form of fetishism.” The determined asexuality of modernist movements such as minimalism and constructivism is to him just another type of idealism—deceitful, pseudointellectual, and ultimately rather pathetic.⁷⁵

By incorporating his *Sex to Sixty* covers into an austere geometric format, Kelley not only soils the integrity of the sexless ideal but upends the utopian fantasies at the root of that artistic ideology. As he points out, “One of the big lies of Modernism is that certain changes in aesthetics would change culture completely, forever”—yet another version of domino-theory cultural politics.⁷⁶ 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 utopianism. While the alignment of pornography and modernist abstraction taints the artistic idealism of the latter, it also counteracts the former, dulling its subversive edge. Like McCarthy, he plays the buffoon, making high modernist art from his prized collection of porno trash, blatantly combining realms meant to be kept apart. The only real transgression here is Kelley’s deliberately heavy-handed social faux pas, which points to the ineptitude of both art and pornography as agents of political and cultural transformation.

HOMICIDAL HIPPIES, CASUAL COITUS, AND DEMENTED DEVIANTS

The 1980s and 90s were marked by a renewed focus on repression and liberation. In 1986 US attorney general Edwin Meese released America’s second official investigation into pornography, a controversial 1,960-page report highlighting the dangers of sexually explicit materials. Widely denounced as partisan and disingenuous, this “final report” was designed, as Walter Kendrick put it a year later, “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.”⁷⁷ Once again sexual openness was linked to unremitting cultural decay.⁷⁸ This willful and egregious “retardation of pornographic discourse,” to use Kendrick’s words, was part of the more general retardation of sexual discourse sustained at both ends of the political spectrum.

By caricaturing the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 70s in the 1980s and 90s, Pettibon at once historicized the repression-liberation debate and sapped sex of its subversive aura. To him sex may be dangerous, but sexual politics is inane. In a work from 1982, a naked hippie stands with his thumb extended, hitchhik-



52.

Raymond Pettibon, No
Title (I've given
about), *The Pleasure-
Giving Arts*, p. 18,
1990. Courtesy Regen
Projects, Los Angeles
© Raymond Pettibon.

ing. "(Leaving commune) I came for love and understanding," he explains, "but got suspicious stares and (sigh) chores instead." The deadpan caption at the bottom—"April 1968, after people had stopped loving each other as much as they did in 1967"—again recalls the capriciousness of the counterculture, epitomized by the rapid decline from hope to disenchantment and the subsequent periodization and mythologization of the era. A 1990 drawing (fig. 5.2) captures the aftermath of this transition. "I'VE GIVEN ABOUT 10 FUZZ THE CLAP THIS MONTH," a naked woman casually brags to her partner as she pushes a hypodermic needle into her arm. The slang and hard-core drug abuse, coupled with the man's mutton-chop sideburns,



53.

Raymond Pettibon, No
Title (I've had sex),
1985. Courtesy Regen
Projects, Los Angeles
© Raymond Pettibon.

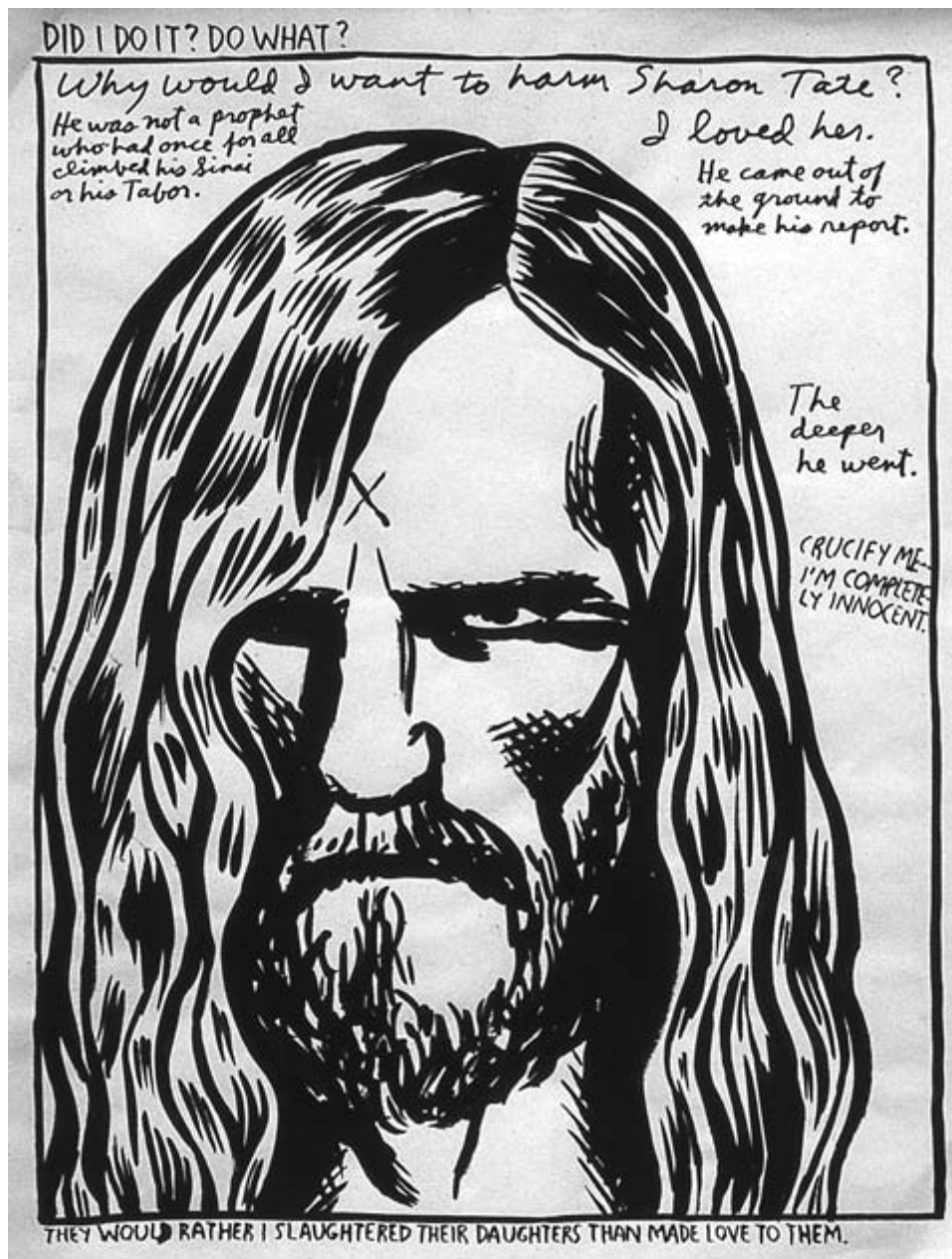
handlebar mustache, and afro hairdo, date the scene in the 1970s. In a 1988 drawing from Pettibon with *Strings*, a tied-up woman uses her teeth to pull a blindfold off a similarly bound man. "SEXUAL FREEDOM GOT US NUDE PARTIES," reads the text. As these drawings insinuate, the only tangible upshot of erotic emancipation was private amusement. That, and disease.

Other drawings feature 60s-era bohemians in outrageous scenes of self-indulgent sex and violence, satirizing the apocalyptic threats of alarmists on both the Right and the Left. In a 1985 drawing (fig. 5.3) the legs of a butchered body stick out from under the bed of a grinning hippie. On the wall behind him, "Love,

Sex, Death” and “ARMLESS LOVE” are scrawled in blood. The first phrase reconfigures the countercultural hallucinogen of choice (LSD) from an agent of mystical consciousness to a slogan of lethal recklessness, while the second reiterates this transformation by punning on the presumption that love is harmless, which here it clearly is not. Pettibon’s homicidal hippies are the flipsides to his amorous hard-core punk fans: the former love in public and rage in private; the latter, vice versa. Yet Pettibon’s nightmarish vision of counterculture carnage is blatantly exaggerated, its absurdity underscored, in the 1988 drawing by the antihero’s preposterous justification: “I’VE HAD SEX 12 TIMES THIS MONTH.” As though that somehow explains the depicted violence. This work pokes fun at counterculture naiveté, yet the real butt of its joke is the more generally overplayed link between sex and social deviance. It is a counterpoint to the 1985 cover of *Cars, TV, Rockets, H-Bomb—You Name It* (fig. 4.3), mentioned in chapter 4, in which a woman has decapitated a man because she hadn’t had sex in “three whole days.” To Pettibon, linking violent social pathology to a surfeit of sex is no less absurd than linking such degeneracy to a lack of it.

As discussed in chapter 3, Pettibon’s bloodthirsty hippies can be seen as generic representations of Charles Manson, preeminent icon of the end of 1960s idealism and a recurring Pettibon character. Public fascination with Manson had been revived in the mid-1980s by a series of sensational television appearances, including a 1986 Emmy award-winning interview with Charlie Rose in which the cult leader repeatedly deflected blame for his crimes onto American society.⁷⁹ In an untitled Pettibon drawing from 1987 (fig. 5.4), Manson glares out from the page, surrounded by vague allusions to and feeble defenses of these crimes. “CRUCIFY ME—I’M COMPLETELY INNOCENT,” he declares. “THEY WOULD RATHER I SLAUGHTERED THEIR DAUGHTERS THAN MADE LOVE TO THEM,” reads the blunt punch line at the bottom, an accusation with particular poignancy in the context of 1980s conservatism and the reinflated fear of sex. (Indeed, with regard to sex education and the distribution of contraception to prevent sexually transmitted disease, one could infer that conservatives did prefer death to promiscuity.) Manson’s infamy, Pettibon’s drawing suggests, is a result not only of the killings but of his disturbing conflation of love and death. Whereas Rose spent much of his interview attempting to pinpoint the biographical roots of the murderer’s aberrant psychopathology, Pettibon portrays him as a product of society’s misguided values and priorities. In the 1986 portrait mentioned in this book’s introduction (fig. 0.1), Manson’s likeness appears to have been taken directly from the Rose interview that year. “I AM YOUR REFLECTION,” Pettibon has him declare, “NOT YOUR OPPOSITE.”

These mid-80s drawings anticipate Michael André Bernstein’s theory of Manson as social phenomenon. Bernstein links the atrocities to Western culture’s idealization of deviance and the liberation of desire. Yet Pettibon’s work also thwarts such arguments by portraying the “disastrous torrent . . . of numb brutality” predicted by Bernstein as no less far-fetched than its utopian counterpart.⁸⁰ Manson’s attempt to deflect blame and cast himself as a martyr hits a nerve, but it also comes off as disingenuous and simplistic, if not deranged, and Pettibon’s tone is always tongue in cheek. His generic hippie maniacs are similarly absurd exaggerations of “domino theory” panic. Late-60s atrocities such as Manson and Altamont may have epitomized the catastrophic potential of excessive emancipation, but reactionary appeals to “normalcy” via self-control are no less problematic.⁸¹ Pet-



54.

Raymond Pettibon, No Title (Did I do it?), 1987. Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles
© Raymond Pettibon.

tibon's drawings inculcate a society fixated on the cultural and political ramifications of indulged desire.

This fixation obscures the fundamentally social nature of sex itself, upholding the myth of permissiveness that dominated views on both the Right and Left.⁸² Pettibon's primary target is America's overblown sex rhetoric, whether it be that of those fighting the system or that of those seeking to shore it up. His works repudiate the post-60s repoliticization of sex by liberationists and reactionaries, and by those feminists for whom sex was simply a reification of patriarchy. In a 1983 drawing from *Virgin Fears*, a woman performs fellatio at knifepoint while the viewer looks down upon her from the vantage point of the assailant. "Ohhh. I can't go on," she pleads as his penis is forced into her mouth. "The taste reminds me of Harry,



55,
Raymond Pettibon, No
Title (OK, that was),
console, heal, or
depict . . . , p. 14,
1984. Courtesy Regen
Projects, Los Angeles
© Raymond Pettibon.

14 c

and 40 years of oppression." The joke, of course, is that the memory of marital obligation is apparently more horrifying than the extreme physical violation at hand. The idea of marriage as institutionalized oppression had been a mainstay of certain radical feminist polemics since the late 1960s, culminating in the 1980s, when activists like Dworkin and MacKinnon explicitly equated it with rape. In Pettibon's

drawing, the victim's implausible reaction forces a clash of theory and practice, of marital-sex-as-rape and actual rape.

Such works are, meanwhile, hardly reconcilable with hopeful alternatives proposed by contemporaneous advocates of sexual pluralism. In Pettibon's world sex is unequivocally dreadful, a bearer of insecurity, cruelty, dissatisfaction, and frustration, and the artist offers no hope for the end of sexual domination and subordination. He appears less concerned with the cultural politics that sustain and are sustained by ordinary sexual relations than with the anguish that to him, it seems, inevitably accompanies such relations. Several drawings from the 1980s embody this pessimism, exposing the psychological and physical violence inflicted upon individuals by an authoritarian system of sociosexual interaction—a system in which sex is at once more personally traumatic and less socially traumatic than those who politicize it often presume. Ranging from comical portrayals of sexual impotence to brutal scenes of sexual abuse, such works contain an array of erotic impulses—heterosexual, homosexual, incestuous, pedophilic, sadomasochistic—all presented rather matter-of-factly.

In a page from *A New Wave of Violence* (1982), a horrified woman embraces a naked man in a bathtub, blood streaming down his arms and a suicide note scrawled on the mirror: "I don't want to live without love." Pettibon adds a dose of gallows humor to this archetypal narrative of love prized over life, for his Romeo sports a prominent erection, suggesting some sort of masochistic stimulation at the suicidal moment—a profane conflation of self-abuse and self-arousal.

In a 1984 work from *console, heal, or depict . . .* (fig. 5.5), a man towers over an ambiguously aged woman clutching a 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 methodically punished for her previous relationships, but by whom? Her possessive lover or husband? Her tyrannical father? Either way, the scene represents a discomforting but not uncommon blend of love, sex, patriarchal domination, jealousy, and abuse that can hardly be resolved simply through greater sexual liberation, sexual restriction, or sexual tolerance.

Pettibon's 1985 zine *The Express Sex Train* contains a plethora of similarly irresolvable scenes populated by unwholesome characters, including fierce dominatrices, a lovesick Nazi, a castrating woman, molesting parents, and siblings doing it "THE WAY MOM N' DAD DID IT, LIKING IT." In one drawing, a man stands in his boxer shorts holding in his hand a tiny naked woman, to whom he remarks, "YOU ARE THE FIRST GIRL I'VE MET—BESIDES MY DAUGHTER—WHO LIKES DISNEYLAND AS MUCH AS SEX."

A page from the 1988 zine *Take Another Rib* features a naked and horrified woman pulling back from an unseen intruder while covering her breasts and crotch. "SEX IS EVERYWHERE ALL THE TIME AND YOU CAN'T ESCAPE," we are told, a daunting decree that would ordinarily heighten the anxious drama of the scene, but that here is immediately deflated by the incongruously lighthearted line that follows: "SHOWER WITH A FRIEND."

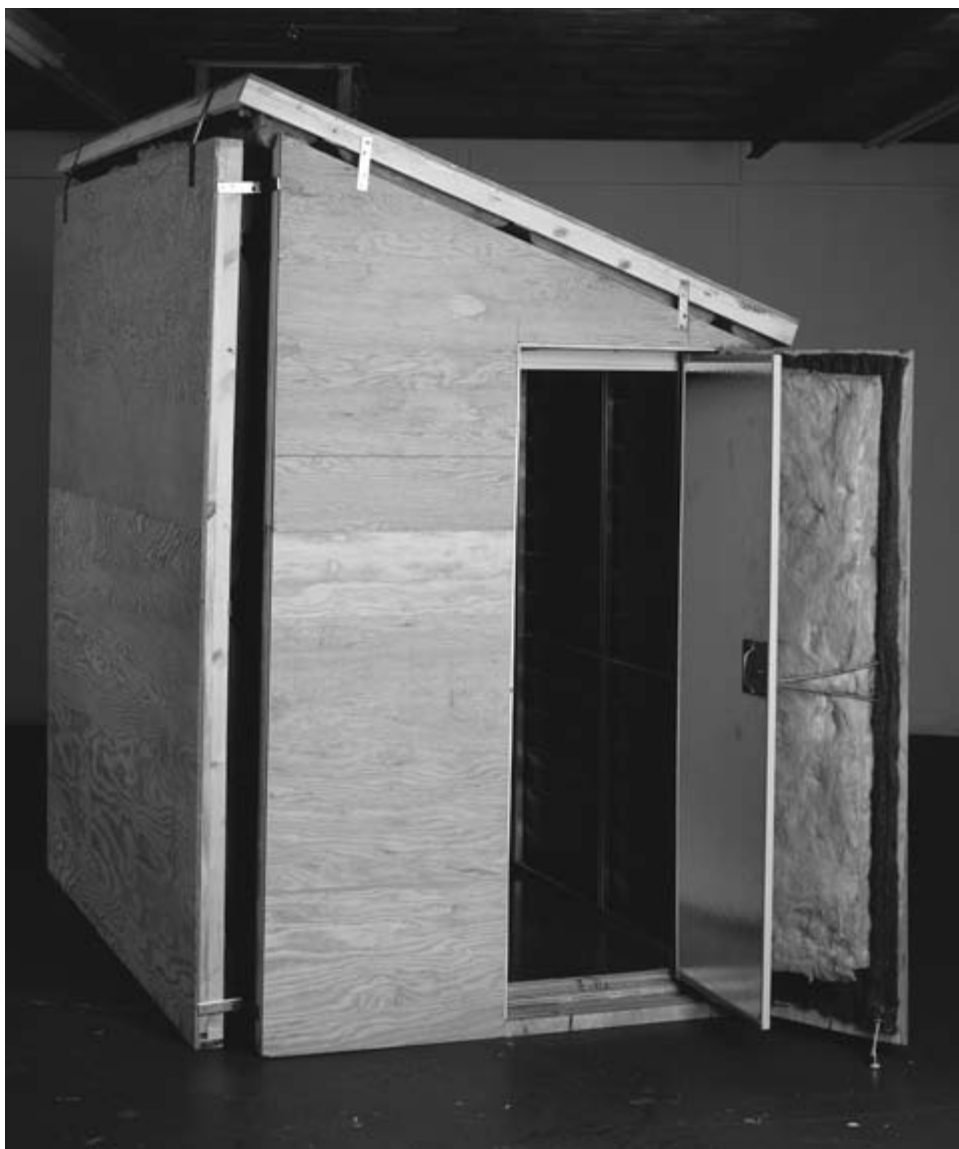
Together, Pettibon's drawings belie the intense cultural politics of their moment by portraying sex as both menacing and pleasurable, sinister and innocent, as infinitely complex, always contradictory, often absurd, and never reducible to conventional polemics.

SOCIAL SEX SCULPTURES, FAMILY FUN, AND ABERRANT AUTOMATA

Kelley likewise invokes the sexual politics of the past in order to comment on the present. *Orgone Shed* (1992; fig. 5.6)—a seven-foot-tall booth lined with steel, insulated in pink fiberglass, and framed in plywood—belongs to the series of “masculine” crafts produced for *Documenta 9*. Like *Kneading Board* (plate 12) and *Torture Table*, discussed in chapter 4, this structure evokes a deranged daddy-in-the-basement-workshop persona whose elaborate creations expose a range of disturbing psychosexual desires lurking under “normal” patriarchal culture. However, *Orgone Shed* is also more specific in its reference; it is an expertly crafted reconstruction of an Orgone Energy Accumulator, a telephone-booth-sized device invented in the 1950s by Wilhelm Reich. A student of Freud who emigrated to the United States in 1939, Reich was among the earliest to suggest a link between erotic and political freedom. Coining the term “sexual revolution,” he argued that the elimination of sexual repression would lead to a utopia with no need for moral guidelines because there would be no antisocial impulses with which to contend.⁸³ Reich’s writings were widely read in the 1960s, and his box acquired a following among key counterculture figures—J. D. Salinger, Paul Goodman, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, Saul Bellow, and Norman Mailer among them. Reich’s ideas were foundational to the notion of progressive change through the liberation of desire.⁸⁴

Re-presented by Kelley thirty years later, these ideas seem not only archaic but half-baked. The Orgone Energy Accumulator was designed and marketed as a collector of a kind of libidinal force field that supposedly flows in the earth’s atmosphere. Participants were to use the device to absorb this “orgone energy,” which not only would result in complete sexual release but could, Reich claimed, also cure a host of social and personal ailments, from fascism to cancer.⁸⁵ A faithful rendition of a thoroughly outdated trend, Kelley’s version is a memorial to an obsolete brand of sexual politics, an embarrassing reminder of a more naive past. (As it turned out, the politics of Reich and his Accumulator were not so straightforward: by the end of the 1960s he had become an ardent Republican, and his chosen successor at the Orgone Institute Diagnostic Clinic, Elsworth F. Baker, was a lifelong conservative who explicitly repudiated the alignment of the “orgonomy” with leftism and bohemianism.)⁸⁶ Kelley circumvents the question of orgonomic politics entirely—but only to highlight its absurdity. He strips the device of its transformative and metaphysical pretensions, using the term *shed* instead of *accumulator* and installing a roll of toilet paper inside. The “orgasmotherapeutic” apparatus has been refashioned into to a backyard storage container cum masturbation chamber. Kelley plays this straight—his do-it-yourself structure comes with detailed diagrams and instructions hanging on the wall beside it—as though Reich’s crackpot philosophy were still somehow viable in the 1990s. That the result is funny shows just how dated the rhetoric of 60s-era sexual liberation had become.⁸⁷ Like *Fresh Acconci*, his 1995 video collaboration with McCarthy, the work calls into question the then-recent return to outdated myths of sexuality and political debates founded on them.

A similar strategy underlies a series of 1998 sculptures in which Kelley facetiously offers his own elaborate social program based on sex. *Composite Femme Fatale*, *Chocolate Lump*, ‘69 *Action Heroes*, and *Odd Man Out* consist of pillows, blankets, socks, and other clothing arranged into humanoid forms whose “heads” feature famous



5.6.
Mike Kelley, *Orgone
Shed*, 1992. Courtesy
Kelley Studio, Inc.

faces cut from movie posters hanging on the walls around them. Looped sound bites from these films play from speakers alongside each arrangement. In '69 *Action Heroes* the grunting of Dolph Lundgren (star of *Men of War*) is paired with the heavy breathing of Jean-Claude Van Damme (star of *Sudden Death*), while their cuddly stand-ins lie head to toe.⁸⁸ The series is accompanied by a poster explaining the sculptures' purpose. "THE GREATEST TRAGEDY OF PRESIDENT CLINTON'S ADMINISTRATION," it begins, "has been his inability (or refusal) to enact the health care reform that he promised as part of his campaign platform." The ensuing text presents a national plan founded upon "a heightened concern for sexual well-being." "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." This well-being, Kelley explains, has been impeded by a media system that stimulates sexual desire only to withhold its satisfaction. In response, he proposes that prostitution be made available free to every man, woman, and child and that celebrities be required by law to make their bodies accessible to everyone in govern-

ment-sponsored sex clinics. Such a plan would only be temporary, the manifesto assures us, for once all are capable of satisfying their pent-up desires “there will no longer be the need for a mass culture industry . . . [and] a ritualized arena of spectacular fantasy figures will serve no cultural purpose.” Put forth as “a stopgap measure” preceding the full implementation of his program, Kelley’s makeshift sex dolls are to serve as springboards to more profound and comprehensive erotic explorations. The clumps of cuddly bodies, fuzzy orifices, and phallic projections are offered as instruments of social therapy and transformation.⁸⁹

Of course, the inadequacy of these sexual surrogates is as obvious as the implausibility of the project overall. Like his *Orgone Shed*, Kelley’s proposal is an absurd revival of an outmoded concept of sexual revolution. His social program plainly evokes the rhetoric of 60s-style liberationism, but as Shep Steiner has observed, it does so only to underscore the fact that “most of the therapeutic claims made and actions performed under the banner of sexual emancipation in 1968 and 1969 are no longer sustainable today, or even utterable with a straight face.”⁹⁰ (In this sense, the “69” in *’69 Action Heroes* can be understood as a chronological marker as well as a reference to the position of the figures.)⁹¹

However, such work must be understood within its contemporaneous context, especially in light of the poster’s opening reference to “the tragedy of President Clinton’s administration.” Kelley focuses on the issue of health care reform, but at the time the country was fully engrossed in the president’s sex life, not his legislative record. Indeed, the series was first exhibited in January 1999, virtually coincident with the start of Clinton’s impeachment proceedings.⁹² The president’s own sexual emancipation overshadowed any and all pressing needs facing American society—including the health care reform on which he had campaigned. As the “sex panics” at the center of the culture wars waned and AIDS increasingly seemed to be under control in the United States, the public turned its attention to the president’s rather banal erotic escapades, couched within a revived debate over repression and liberation. In a 2000 catalogue essay on Kelley’s series, William Wood points out that the works must be seen in relation to a culture consumed with sex talk. In addition to the Monica Lewinsky scandal, Wood refers to a host of simultaneous phenomena—from Senator Bob Dole’s endorsement of Viagra to the conviction of celebrities such as Hugh Grant and George Michael for having sex in public places, along with a plethora of exploitative talk shows featuring guests who revealed their most intimate sexual adventures.⁹³ Of course, Clinton was himself seen by both supporters and opponents as a 1990s apotheosis of “the 60s,” as much of the rhetoric surrounding his candidacy and administration was set in generational terms. Depending on one’s opinion of the past, Clinton represented either a welcomed revival of 60s idealism or a disastrous resurgence of that period’s moral bankruptcy. For those who held the former position, the disgraced president embodied yet another lost opportunity. For those who held the latter, his humiliation only confirmed the need for tighter restraints, as sexual indulgence was again seen as a sign of, and path toward, moral failure—both personal and societal. Sex was not only politicized once again but put on trial as Americans deliberated over cigars, phone sex, and a semen-stained dress, over whether behavior in bed should disqualify one from office and whether the country’s “puritan heritage,” as Kelley puts it, should be shed or salvaged.

Kelley’s mock manifesto satirizes the championing of sexual liberation, while

drawing attention to the very real problems associated with sexual restriction. Despite his harebrained solution, the issues he raises are legitimate: the need for health care reform, the importance of mental and sexual well-being, America's vestigial puritanism, and the trouble with "a popular culture industry that bombards us continually with a pantheon of fantasy figures." The poster's verso offers concrete evidence of these predicaments: a long list of quotations from newspaper articles about a male stalker who had recently tormented Hollywood director Steven Spielberg. The detailed rape fantasies documented here epitomize the problems of a media system founded upon the simultaneous stimulation and frustration of sexual desire.⁹⁴ And yet the abhorrent violence of those fantasies—the perpetrator was found armed with a knife, razor blades, handcuffs, adhesive tape, and the names of Spielberg's seven children—confirms that a simple unfettering of desire would hardly be less problematic. Offering dysfunctional "functional" sculptures as part of an utterly impractical therapeutic program, coupled to a real-world incident that serves as both evidence of the problems evoked and foil to their proposed solution, Kelley's series points to a crucial dilemma often overlooked by liberationists: whereas self-restraint limits one's prospects, it also provides a base level of social harmony.

Yet, like Pettibon, Kelley is not interested in resolving the tired battle between sexual revolutionaries and counterrevolutionaries. To him, that enduring debate—of which the Clinton controversy was only the latest utterance—is the problem, for it obscures the fact that both repression and desire are not only socially constructed but overhyped. Modern society ensures a conflicted psyche from the start.

The notion of social-sexual conditioning underlies two of McCarthy's motorized sculptures from the early 1990s. Extending the gender implications of earlier works such as *Rocky*, these works parody the rites of passage by which patriarchal dominance—over land and animal, but also over woman—is handed down from one demented generation of men to the next.⁹⁵ Sex here is not only denaturalized but dehumanized. Presented as a set of endlessly repetitive motions performed by robots who never reach climax, intercourse is reduced to simple, preprogrammed, joyless mechanics, to the mere churning of hips: back and forth, in and out.

The Garden (1991–92; plate 14) is a room-sized thicket of trees, rocks, grass, and leaves. What initially appears to be an uninhabited fragment of television scenery—McCarthy actually appropriated a discarded stage set from the TV western *Bonanza*—becomes unexpectedly sordid.⁹⁶ Glimpsed between the trunks and foliage, a middle-aged man, pants at his ankles, repeatedly fornicates a tree, while a younger man screws a hole in the ground—as if father and son are participating in some heathen forest ritual. Everything, including the nature itself, is rendered explicitly unnatural. 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. The trees end midtrunk, and the land is revealed to be just a basic scaffold covered by strips of Astroturf grass, plastic leaves, and synthetic rocks. While the father figure monotonously humps his stump, the motor that thrusts his pelvis in and out is visible, and its drone permeates the room. Similarly, the figures themselves are at once 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 statue.

Sex is thus reduced to an automated sequence of aberrant actions performed by impassive dummies who seem to have grossly misinterpreted the promotion of “natural” sex as an antidote to the artifices of culture. *The Garden* presents both sex and nature as fake, implicating the myths that underlay a range of 1960s-era phenomena—not just the sexual revolution but also the burgeoning environmentalism movement and the general veneration of the land that inspired agricultural communes and other back-to-nature endeavors. Commonly personified as a fertile female, nature was positioned in opposition to Western civilization and its oppressive materialism. McCarthy has himself described *The Garden* as a spoof of the counterculture’s fetishization of nature.⁹⁷ Yet as Ralph Rugoff points out, this mythology is actually part of a much broader, quintessentially American tradition that extends from the romantic paintings of the Hudson River School and the Luminists to today’s Sierra Club calendars, “the nature-lover’s equivalent of pin-up nudes.”⁹⁸ McCarthy takes the notion of a virginal land of milk and honey to a laughable extreme, endowing it with a set of sexual orifices. His protagonists, it seems, have taken free love and nature love a bit too literally.

The Garden also mocks the condemnation of sex by those who conversely see increased permissiveness as a potent threat to morality. McCarthy’s figures are upstanding citizens—clean-cut, emotionally reserved white men in business attire—evidently corrupted because their perverse sexual urges have gotten the better of them. The work is a vision of contemporary man fallen from grace. Yet like Pettibon’s images of murderous nymphomaniac hippies, McCarthy’s scene is utterly preposterous. It taunts those who draw a direct link between sex and social deviance. Indeed, as represented in McCarthy’s Garden of anti-Eden, sex is no more than a mechanized, sterile, and emotionally detached routine, habituated and given meaning through processes of acculturation.⁹⁹ The implied father-son relationship of the men evokes the rites of passage by which sexual constructs are handed down from one generation to the next, naturalized until they seem instinctual.¹⁰⁰ *The Garden* lampoons this process by featuring zombielike figures dispassionately performing perverted acts—literally crimes against nature—in a blatantly unnatural landscape.

In *Cultural Gothic* (1992; plate 15), a life-sized man stands with his hands on the shoulders of his young son, whose 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, and the father again nods approvingly. The cycle repeats ad infinitum. This scene of father-son bonding and goat-fucking caricatures the indoctrination of sexual values, particularly how culturally constructed distinctions between the natural and unnatural inform definitions of normal and abhorrent activity. As Rugoff points out, McCarthy stages this “lesson” “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.”¹⁰¹ The work presents one of Western

culture's most essential taboos as a routine stage in white, middle-class upbringing. Well groomed and conservatively dressed, the man and boy are a model of familial relations. The bestial relationship in *Cultural Gothic* is also never actually consummated, for this is just practice—"a dry run, an air fuck," as Rugoff puts it.¹⁰² The work's potency stems from the modesty of the figures and the matter-of-fact way in which they perform their deranged pedagogic ritual. The "civilized" appearance of the man and boy clashes with an act typically associated with country "hicks." (Had McCarthy dressed them as hillbillies, the work would have been completely different.) *Cultural Gothic* represents an alternate social order in which animals are earnestly used to teach maturing children about sex—a normalization of perversity that foregrounds the constructed nature of sexual behavior, the fact that it is conditioned rather than innate. The work renders explicit the notion that, as Leo Bersani has argued, sex generates politics. And yet, like *The Garden*, it presents the sex acts themselves as expressionless, preprogrammed, and repetitive.

McCarthy's vision is harrowing. His automatons smash the illusion that, to paraphrase Foucault, "liberation" is ever really in the balance, that the choice between restraint and indulgence is somehow a choice between conformity and rebellion. The dystopia depicted in these works is the result of neither excessive permissiveness nor excessive repression, but of a society whose bloated and overly politicized discourse on sex—to which Foucault and his progeny belong—turns out vacant individuals who simply go through the motions. Their penises having been declared tools of oppression, men are left to either perpetuate patriarchal dominance or find new objects of desire—animals, holes in the ground, or, in case of Kelley's demented social program, a bunch of pillowy surrogates. Indeed, Kelley's pathological sex sculptures underscore the very irresolvability of this condition, as do Pettibon's murderous peacenik drawings. All three artists betray a deep ambivalence toward sex, downgrading it to counter its persistent overemphasis, complicating it to counter its oversimplification. Uncontrollable yet mechanized, violent yet banal, pleasurable yet self-defeating, spontaneous yet manufactured, sex is portrayed as a linchpin of a system sustained, not threatened, by the politicization of desire. Their works force a reconsideration of meanings that have been internalized, normalized, and naturalized—not only the relationship between sex and society but the very ways in which one is turned on and turned off.

SIX

THE KIDS AREN'T ALRIGHT

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, 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,” a mid-1970s sound collage produced by Kelley as part of *Destroy All Monsters*.¹ Devoid of musical accompaniment, it is a remixed recording of fellow band member Cary Loren’s nephews giddily improvising on dirty playground poetry. The work’s riotous mix of profanity, gender bending, sex, violence, and perverted humor prefigures much of Kelley’s subsequent art career. That it is essentially the work of children makes this grotesquerie 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 kiddie performers know they’re being naughty. The work is an expression of psyches caught between childhood’s churning impulses and the social norms that label many of those impulses obscene—and this conflict is what makes the song so funny to them. For adults,

however, the laughter is more uneasy. Our little tykes are not as pure and innocent as we imagine them to be.

Of the numerous thematic commonalities between the works of Kelley, McCarthy, and Pettibon, the demystification of childhood is perhaps the strongest. All three have consistently exploited presumptions of youthful purity, challenging long-standing myths by emphasizing the unsavory qualities routinely glossed over by them. These artists reveal how such myths reinforce essential (adult) cultural norms, in the West and particularly in the United States. Presenting an alternative version of artistic regression, their work stands in sharp contrast to the zealous idealization and politicization of youth in the 1960s and early 70s—what George Boas referred to as America’s “cult of childhood.”² This “cult” was rooted in the romanticism of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when the child was frequently held up as a primal source of innovation and reform, an embodiment of innate human goodness uncorrupted by society.³ The return to childhood has long been aligned with radical politics, with the subversion of established conventions and institutions.⁴ In the twentieth century the Rousseauian notion of youth spurred an interest in children’s art, complementing primitivist romanticizations of non-Western cultures.⁵ Believing that the child was not only a purer being but a purer creator, several early-century artists—Paul Klee, Vasily Kandinsky, Mikhail Larionov, Joan Miró, and André Breton among them—adopted “childlike” approaches as a form of cultural politics, a gambit revived by midcentury artists such as Jean Dubuffet and Asger Jorn.⁶ Despite the diversity of their work, all envisioned the “natural” child as an embodiment of raw human essence, in contrast to the artifices of society.

Kelley, McCarthy, and Pettibon present childhood not as a force against “asphyxiating culture,” as Dubuffet famously termed it, but as the very basis of that culture. According to Kelley, “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.”⁷ By the end of the 1960s the implicit link between youth and radical politics had grown at once more suspect and more entrenched. As cultural critics on the Left and Right questioned the special status widely afforded to young people, the youth movement was increasingly seen as either a facilitator of consumerism or an excuse for reckless indulgence.⁸ Yet such realizations did little to slow the proliferation of similarly minded subcultures in the decades that followed. Meanwhile, myths of childhood have fueled retrenchment as much as rebelliousness. By the 1980s, the adulation of youth had become central to the conservative politics of those bent on rescuing civilization from the perceived decadence of the 1960s and 70s. The various anti-rock, antidrug, and antipornography crusades were initiated on behalf of a no less idealized child—innocent, innately virtuous, and therefore vulnerable to the threat of a debased popular culture—a puritan construct that has long been central to American cultural politics.⁹ Kelley, McCarthy, and Pettibon problematize both the model of the progressive youth and that of the innocent child. Rather than representing childhood as the embodiment of human nature in order to justify a particular politics, liberal or conservative, they evoke it as a way to challenge the inevitability of acculturation, of shaking its very foundations.

In 1960 psychologist Kenneth Keniston published *The Uncommitted: Alienated*

Youth in American Society, a prescient account of the teenage rumblings that would blossom over 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."¹⁰ A generation later, Kelley, McCarthy, and Pettibon offer an pointed corrective to this assumption, suggesting that America's obsession with youth is rooted in delusion. As represented in their work, preadult existence—whether infancy or adolescence—is riddled with struggle, conflict, and confusion. Maybe we did not really love our lives as children so much; we've just convinced ourselves that we did.

THE ADOLESCENTIZATION OF DISSENT

A drawing from the 1988 zine *Pettibon with Strings* (fig. 6.1) features a stylishly blasé beatnik couple—he in a black turtleneck, an arm around his girl; she, equally chic, about to take a drag from a cigarette. They are an archetype of 1960s youth, an American classic. By the time of Pettibon's drawing, however, such scenes of smokes, shades, and cool car culture had long been drained of the rebelliousness initially associated with them. Pettibon thus supplements his image with a quote overhead:

I STOLE MY SISTER'S BOYFRIEND. IT WAS ALL WHIRLWIND, HEAT, AND FLASH. WITHIN A WEEK WE KILLED MY PARENTS AND HIT THE ROAD.

The specifically female voice both enhances the quote's ferocity and inverts the traditional gender roles that typically underlie such scenes. The standard James Dean-type "rebel," whose feminine companion is typically innocent, passive, and virginal, is here played by an aggressive and self-assured woman. The mix of teenage detachment and homicidal violence is so heavy-handed, though, that the visual cliché and the sense of defiance affixed to it only seem more outdated. These adolescents are liberated not through sex, drugs, rock and roll, or any other stock expression of youthful rebellion. They murder their parents with utter indifference. Sterile by contrast, 1960s-style subculture is recast as a safe sublimation of what may really lurk within the mind of the angst-ridden teen.

Largely an American "discovery," the concept of adolescence did not exist before the late nineteenth century, and it was only in the early twentieth century that it established itself in the public consciousness. In 1904 American psychologist G. Stanley Hall advanced the first comprehensive theory of adolescence, characterizing it as a transitional period of crisis, of "storm and stress," but also as a time of enormous potential and vision.¹¹ This latter view was taken up by American social reformers of the time, who aligned the in-between phase of development with freedom, independence, moral clarity, and radical thought.¹² With the ascent of youth-based popular culture following World War II, adolescence was seen not only as a life stage distinct from both childhood and adulthood but as a self-contained social contingent endowed with insight and prescience—and, of course, buying power. The stage was set for what, in 1969, Theodor Roszak called the "adolescentization of dissent," the belief in the power of youth to revolutionize society.¹³ At the moment encapsulated by Pettibon's drawing, adolescence was seen as a source of power, a special developmental phase in which one could—for



better or worse—channel earlier childhood instincts toward real social and political change. Overlooked, however, was the understanding of that phase as a time of crisis, of uncertainty and turmoil beneath a facade of self-confidence and perspicacity.

In the late 1960s and early 70s, popular myths of adolescence were reconsidered. With their seminal 1969 article “Adolescence in Historical Perspective,” John and Virginia Demos became the first to examine the concept as a historical invention with ideological underpinnings. They also characterized youth culture as a form of institutionalized adolescence—less a rejection of adult culture than a conventional way to ease the inevitable transition into it. Anxious about the looming responsibilities and life decisions of adulthood, the teenager joins a subculture “where a clear-cut, if temporary, identity comes ready-made.”¹⁴ This understanding was articulated around the same time by Erik Erikson, who argued that such subcultures primarily serve to soothe an essentially disintegrated adolescent identity.¹⁵

By grounding teen rebelliousness in the psychological and ideological, these late-60s reassessments challenged the politicization of youth, and since then adolescent subcultures have increasingly been seen as vehicles for acculturation rather than its refusal. Yet the myth of youth rebellion has prevailed in the collective imagination, remaining a cornerstone of American popular culture and the alarmist reaction to it. The discourses of punk and other post-60s subcultures

61.

Raymond Pettibon, No Title (I stole my sister's), *Pettibon with Strings*, p. 26, 1988. Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles © Raymond Pettibon.

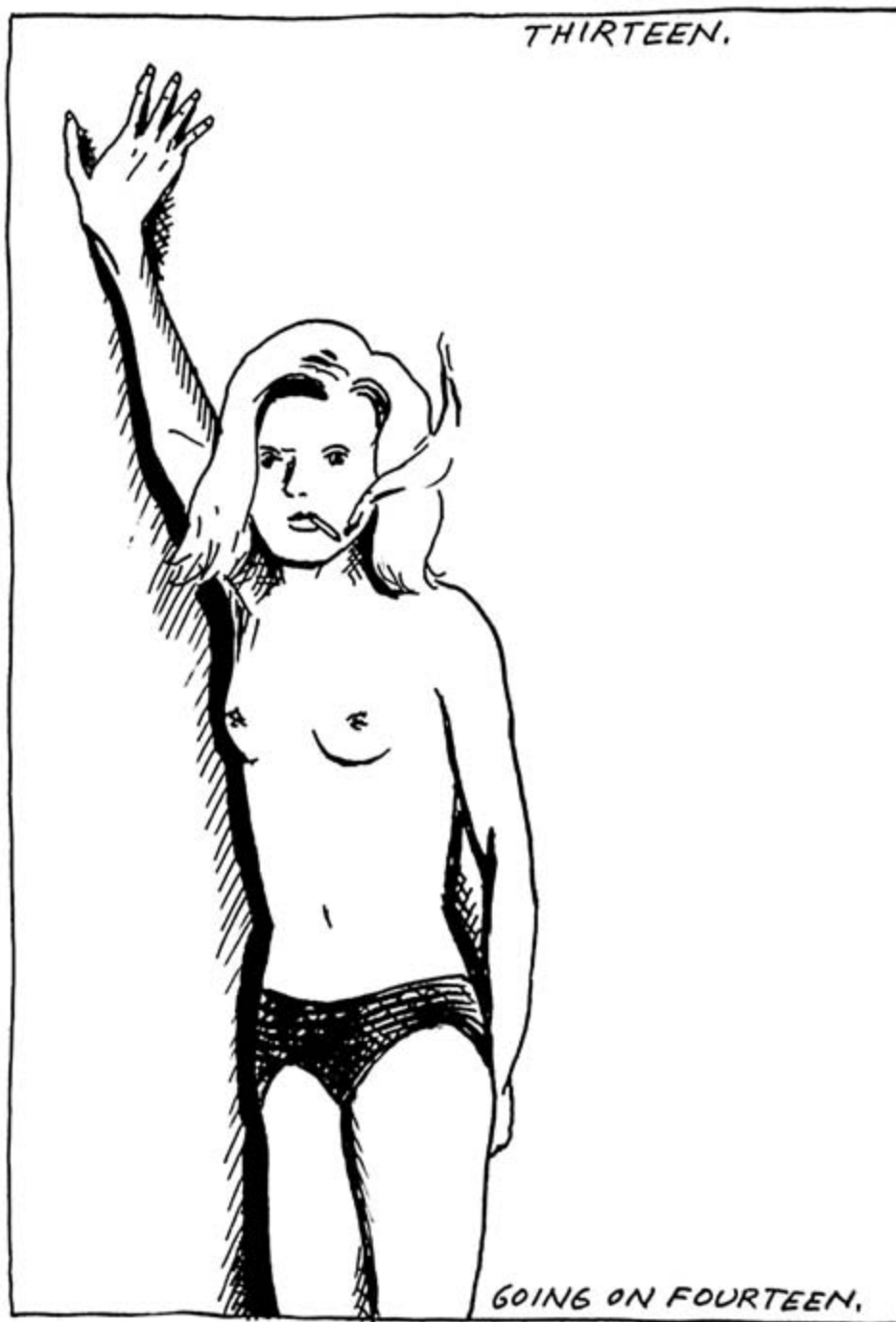


were largely motivated by this myth, as was that surrounding a newfound group of young people who in the 1980s championed personal materialism as part of the Reagan revolution. Obviously at odds with the progressive movements of the past, this latter struggle was no less reformist, and it was similarly cast in terms of a generation gap—this time between ex-hippie baby boomers and their neoconservative children. Still prized as a source of transformation and innovation, youth was now evoked in support of a return to reason and pragmatism, common sense and traditional values.¹⁶

Both Pettibon and Kelley portray teenagers as profoundly unwholesome beings, half-child-half-adult hybrids, dictated by faddish whim, regressive imprudence, conformity, insecurity, and uncontrollable hormonal drives—at once more complex and more benign than typically presumed. A drawing from Pettibon's 1983 *Capricious Missives* (fig. 6.2) features two high school portraits, each an epitome of 80s-style preppiness. Yet the words "Double Suicide" hover overhead, transforming these standard yearbook images into those circulated by the shocked parents of teen suicides. With their clean-cut good looks, they are poster children for misunderstood youth, for the discrepancy between popular idealizations and their more sinister realities. In an untitled drawing from 1985 (fig. 6.3), 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, GOING ON FOURTEEN" reads the caption, a play on the expression "thirteen going on

62.

Raymond Pettibon,
No Title (Double
Suicide), *Capricious
Missives*, p. 22,
1983. Courtesy Regen
Projects, Los Angeles
© Raymond Pettibon.



6.3.
Raymond Pettibon, No
Title (Thirteen),
1985. Courtesy Regen
Projects, Los Angeles
© Raymond Pettibon.

thirty,” meant to describe an adolescent sophisticated beyond her years. By replacing “thirty” with “fourteen,” Pettibon suggests that this topless schoolgirl is actually right on schedule, that such behavior is not prematurely adultlike but in line with her budding sexual desires and natural curiosity, which in fact it is. One’s uneasiness before this image—the suspicion that it is some kind of kiddy porn, even though nothing about the scene renders it necessarily such—reveals a continued ambivalence toward the prospect of early teen sexuality.

Pettibon portrays adolescence in all its ungainly glory. His counterculture

drawings provide his most acerbic—and explicitly political—critiques of romanticized youth. When not depicted as sex-crazed Manson-like maniacs, his hippies are shown to be simply foolish, self-absorbed, and frivolous. Often plummeting from buildings or overdosing, these characters embody the crushed hopes and dreams of their generation, while accompanying texts ruthlessly lay waste to an array of 60s-era slogans, satirizing youthful optimism and the faith in young people as harbingers of utopia. Along with the hippie dimwits that populate the *Tripping Corpse* zines, among others, Pettibon's 1989 video-mockumentary *The Whole World Is Watching: Weatherman '69* represents the militant group of self-styled revolutionaries as a bumbling bunch of privileged, ignorant adolescents who spend their time pondering the virtues of multicolored toothbrushes, condemning baseball for being too capitalistic, and arguing over whether they can keep their Levi's and still be radical.¹⁷ Founding member Bernardine Dohrn introduces herself as the "Weathermen's balls" and spews a host of platitudes. "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 exclaims, "the Chinese and the Russians know how to treat their women!" Emerging in the late 1960s, the Weathermen positioned itself as a more committed and militant incarnation of the American counterculture, but by the 1980s the group had become synonymous with the youth movement's demise—its extremist last gasp and, for some, the ultimate proof of its fundamental depravity.¹⁸ (This last assessment was revived during the 2008 presidential campaign, when Barack Obama's passing association with former Weathermen leader William Ayers was used to paint the candidate as an anti-American terrorist sympathizer.) In Pettibon's view, however, such activists are extreme only in their inanity, in the irrelevance of their deeds and the absurdity of their delusions. Together, these works target not only "the 60s" but the collective amnesia that has allowed its idealizations—and politicizations—of youth to be repeatedly recycled.

Of course, Pettibon's own South Bay subculture was one such recycling. Despite their antihippie posturing, punk and its offshoots maintained the notion of youth as a source of enlightenment. Self-characterized as a more genuine expression of defiance, these movements essentially revived the "adolescentization of dissent" popularized in the 1960s. And whereas the music was anti-aesthetic, the look antifashion, and the language dystopian, punk's culture of crudeness and aggression was, like past movements, quickly commercialized, codified into a trendy style. In 1981 music critic Jon Savage summed up the growing sense of punk disillusionment: "I still like records and things, but I don't make the mistake of thinking that they'll fuel the barricades: for in pop there is no Youth Rebellion, only Youth Consumption."¹⁹ Pettibon's "tripping corpses" undercut enduring notions of youth by historicizing them—that is, by marking their breakdown in the late 1960s and early 1970s—and thus rendering them plainly outmoded. As consistently implied by his works from the late 1970s to the mid-80s—the early zines, his numerous punk drawings, the *Sir Drone* video—the only thing dumber than extremist groups like the Weathermen are subsequent subcultures with even less coherent politics.

Whether featuring hippies, punks, or both, Pettibon's work succinctly sums up the history of postwar youth culture—a cycle of idealism gained, lost, recuperated, and lost again. In an untitled drawing from 1985 (fig. 6.4), he condenses this cycle



6.4.

Raymond Pettibon, No
Title (I was born),
1985. Courtesy Regen
Projects, Los Angeles
© Raymond Pettibon.

into an image of a Mohawk-headed punk shooting up while sitting on the floor in her underwear. A single quote looms above her:

I WAS BORN AT WOODSTOCK.

Leaden in its impact, this work links two of the most prominent music-based youth subcultures in then-recent memory. Presented as the literal and metaphorical offspring of the 1960s counterculture, punk apparently ended just as its progenitor did—with excess and self-indulgence, with a proverbial hypodermic needle

pressed under the skin. Placing these supposed opposites on a single historical trajectory, Pettibon pithily portrays both as personally destructive and politically impotent. Such drawings likewise cast doubt upon the politics of artistic transgression itself, whether high or low, visual art or music, and enduring debates based on already demythologized mythologies.

Pettibon's works do not simply attack music and music culture; they spotlight the psychological complexities of youth that underlie that culture—complexities neglected by advocates and detractors alike. Nearly all of Pettibon's relentless punk send-ups portray similar visions of transparent and often quite pathetic adolescent insecurity. An untitled drawing from 1986 features a punk 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 . . .

The macho punk persona is, once again, depicted as a cover for homosexual desire. In a drawing from *New Wavy Gravy* 2 (fig. 6.5), two gawky boys sit side by side on a bed, awkwardly discussing their plan:

"Shall we listen to hard rock? Your parents won't hear us having sex over the noise." "That won't do. My mom will come 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."

Pettibon has produced an abundance of such drawings, each frankly proposing that young people are motivated not by any rational political program or revolutionary ideal but by social conformity, psychosexual desire, confusion, and emotional release—needs that are, if less noble, then eminently knottier, more discomfiting, and more pervasive.

Kelley has similarly addressed the complexities of youth. Destroy All Monsters' inelegant embrace of amateurism and juvenile humor, as well as actual children's toys, was meant not only as an affront to the self-seriousness of 60s rock but as a more candid expression of the psychological chaos of youth. As Kelley put it at the time, "Adolescents are the people that are the most confused of all, and if anybody can relate to our confused music, it's adolescents."²⁰ In the wake of the counterculture, this assertion would have been understood as a dig against the then-prominent view of adolescents as prescient, not confused. *Elegy to the Symbionese Liberation Army* (plate 8) dates from the same mid-70s moment and targets a group that, like the Weathermen, cast itself as a more extremist faction of the 60s youth movement, only to become its death-knell.²¹

If *Elegy* reflects the demise of that movement, Kelley's 1984 painting *Junior High Notebook Cover* (plate 16) represents its afterlife. An all-over composition of blue ballpoint pen-like doodles, it features the names of some of Detroit's most provocative bands from the late 1960s and early 70s counterculture period—the SRC, the Amboy Dukes, the MC5—embellished by checkerboard patterns, paisleys, and spooky decorations. Alongside these hand-scribbled logos and psychedelic frill are the letters KCUF, which may seem like another acronym for a band or a radio

6.5.

Raymond Pettibon,
No Title (Shall we
listen), *New Wavy
Gravy* 2, p. 10,
1985. Courtesy Regen
Projects, Los Angeles
© Raymond Pettibon.

"Shall we listen to hard rock? Your parents won't hear us having sex over the noise." "That won't do. My mom will come 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."

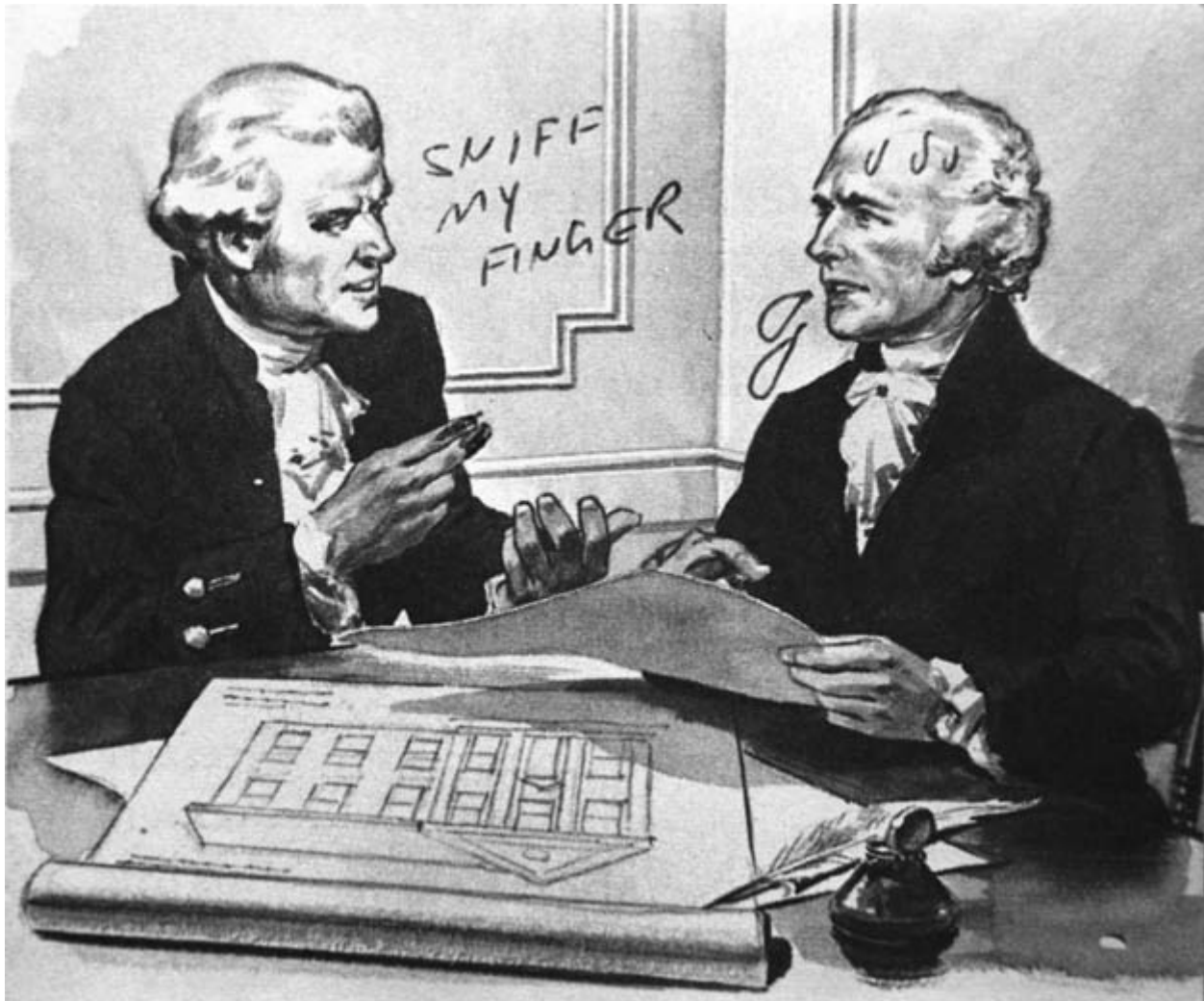


..WEIN, WEIB, UND GESANG (\$1.40),
SELFISHNESS (BY MICHAEL GIRA) (\$1.75),
JUST HAPPY TO BE WORKING (\$1.40),
THE EXPRESS SEX TRAIN (\$1.40),
A CAN AT THE CROSSROADS (\$1.40),
CARS, TV, ROCKETS, H-BOMB (\$1.40)

station, until it is read in reverse. Like Pettibon's drawings, *Notebook Cover* acknowledges the continued relevance of "the 60s" in the 1980s, while effectively antiquating its idealization of youth. The subcultures that thrived in the post-60s era are implicit targets, and in fact the SRC, the Amboy Dukes, and the MC5 are often considered protopunk. At a time when punk was all the rage, Kelley saps the subversiveness from its progenitors; as he did with the SLA, he treats these bands as ornamental frill. "Radical" rock and roll, the work suggests, was about as subversive as the flaming eyeballs, daggers, and spiderwebs that adorn their names, as defiant as a common expletive spelled backward. Filled with hackneyed expressions of early adolescent insolence, Kelley's *Notebook Cover* essentially infantilizes youth rebellion, downgrading it to the level of early-teen daydream trifles and quaint juvenile vulgarisms. Such insurrections apparently belong not to the barricades but to the junior high school classroom.

In his 1989 performance *Pansy Metal/Clovered Hoof*, Kelley turned to heavy metal. Staged in collaboration with the Anita Pace Dance Company in Los Angeles, this work was conceived as a kind of grotesque fashion show. Dressed only in underwear and silk banners designed by Kelley, models paraded down runway ramps with bells attached to their ankles, moving to the music of the seminal metal band Motörhead.²² Though rooted in the late 1960s and early 70s, the heavy metal genre blossomed in the 1980s, and Los Angeles became, in music sociologist Deena Weinstein's words, "the major metal Mecca in the United States."²³ To fans, this music was more incendiary than rock or punk had ever been—and detractors on both the Left and Right agreed. It was the primary target of the Parents' Music Resource Center (PMRC) and the resulting Senate hearings, during which metal was singled out for encouraging youth degeneracy, misogyny, sexual perversion, violence, suicide, and Satanism. As Weinstein notes, however, this supposedly subversive subculture largely "carried forward the attitudes, values and practices that characterized the Woodstock generation."²⁴ Indeed, like punk, the movement was based on an inversion of countercultural codes, substituting despair for hope, evil for love, black for earth tones and rainbow colors, leather for natural fibers. Deflating heavy metal defiance along with alarmist reactions to it, *Pansy Metal/Clovered Hoof* explicitly aligned its antisocial posture with fashion. It not only depicted metal's belligerent identity as the product of a set of standardized behaviors and signs but "feminized" it via the silk costumes, ankle bells, and fashion-show setting. Like the macho art movements to which Kelley's craft-based work responds, heavy metal can be understood as yet another cooptation of the feminine—with its uniform of long hair and makeup, its elaborate theatricality, and its emotional expressiveness—shrouded as it were in hypermasculinity. Kelley's banners further undermine the supposed authenticity of that expressiveness by featuring deliberately idiotic renditions of the diabolical imagery typical of the genre's album covers, and by having his models perform a mechanized version of headbanging, portrayed as a programmed routine rather than as the impulsive release of raw rage that fans claim it to be.²⁵ As parodied by Kelley, heavy metal is yet another spectacular adolescent fad.

In other works, Kelley at once downgrades youth culture and re-presents it as more complicated than mainstream myths would suggest. The 1989 *Reconstructed History* series, for example, consists of fifty black-and-white textbook illustrations



inelegantly defaced by scatological scribbles and pornographic interpolations: Alexander Hamilton asks Thomas Jefferson to sniff his blackened finger (fig. 6.6), in response to which the latter vomits; Benjamin Franklin's signing of the Treaty of Alliance is rudely interrupted by an onlooker's superhuman-sized penis laid out across the table. America's heroes—colonials and pilgrims, founding fathers, New World explorers, and noble Indians—are here transformed into 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 graffiti himself or merely appropriated them. Exhibiting a perfect mix of crudeness and lewdness, they seem uncannily authentic. And undeniably familiar. The pride of novice teenage vandals—invariably male—such defacements are endemic to school libraries. As with the playground rhyme featured in “Mom’s and Dad’s Pussy,” these filthy flourishes are manifestations of psyches that are perverse, but no less normal for it. The *Reconstructed History* series renders explicit Georges Bataille’s antiromanticizing assertion that the “dirty scribbling” of youngsters expresses the destructive desires and sadistic instincts of youth.²⁶

6.6.
Mike Kelley, “Hamilton
and Jefferson,” from
Reconstructed History,
1989. Courtesy Kelley
Studio, Inc.



67.

Mike Kelley, *Three-Point Program / Four Eyes*, 1987. Courtesy Kelley Studio, Inc.

Kelley's 1987 *Three-Point Program/Four Eyes* (fig. 6.7) resembles the championship banners hung from rafters in high school gyms. The work's pathetic announcement is at odds with its bold, white-on-black lettering and triumphal design:

PANTS SHITTER
&
PROUD
P.S.
JERK-
OFF
TOO
(AND I WEAR GLASSES)

This retardation proclamation rejoices in adolescent vulgarity. Yet *Three-Point*



6.8.

Mike Kelley, Untitled
(Allegorical Drawing),
1976. Courtesy Kelley
Studio, Inc.

Program/Four Eyes is a blatant provocation rather than a seemingly genuine piece of juvenilia. It conflates two diametrically opposite views of youth, both specifically coded male: the model of teen achievement connoted by the championship banner format on the one hand and the litany of teen insecurities suggested by its text on the other. Evoking both the jock and the misfit, this work presents youth identity as riddled with perpetual physical and psychological conflict—between self-control and regression, adulthood and childhood, virility and weakness, ideal and reality.

Kelley had earlier caricatured this conflicted identity in a 1976 “allegorical drawing” (fig. 6.8) in which he refers to a gangly, pimple-faced monster standing in his underwear with eyes bulging out of his head and tongue dangling from his mouth as “the spirit of adolescence.” (Kelley reprised this image several times: in a 1979 drawing titled *Energy Made Visible*; in his 1993 *Roth/Mouse/Wolverton* series,

an homage to three influential cartoonists; and in a logo he designed for Destroy All Monsters' mid-1990s reunion tour.) Kelley's portrayal of the adolescent as a contradictory being beset by uncontrollable and conflictive bodily urges resembles Pettibon's teenagers, who also teem with a mix of irrepressible sexuality, frustration, and aggression. *Three-Point Program/Four Eyes* is a call to arms for what Ralph Rugoff has called the "adolescent supernerd," a paragon of uncoolness, an incontinent four-eyed chronic wanker—and proud of it.²⁷ This work imagines an alternative form of defiance, a rejoinder to the very forces of conformity that ensure an unsettled teen psyche. The youth ideal is not simply a fantasy. It is a real problem in and of itself, a burden carried by all those hopeless boys who know all too well that they will never live up to its standards.

PLUSHOPHILIA

Kelley's 1991 photo-assemblage *Ahh...Youth!* (plate 17) includes an image of the artist himself as a scrawny teen. All the conflicts and insecurities of adolescence are written on his greasy, pimply face, cruelly preserved in this yearbooklike portrait. His miserable mug is itself an irrefutable retort against the romanticization of youth; it alone is enough to give pause before one longs for his or her own salad days. Yet this photograph is only one of eight that make up *Ahh...Youth!* The others are similarly posed portraits of tattered secondhand stuffed animals. Like the acned adolescent, the soiled toy is an embodiment of blemished ideals—literally and figuratively dirty.²⁸

With *Ahh...Youth!* Kelley concluded an extensive body of work, mostly consisting of stuffed animals collected from thrift stores and positioned on used blankets, afghans, or tablecloths. Unlike junk sculptures and assemblages that either elevate refuse to art status—essentially an exercise in high-low inversion—or romanticize it as an homage to decay, loss, or death, Kelley's early-1990s compositions amplify the original cultural significance of his found objects and underscore the specific myths they evoke.²⁹ These assemblages are outgrowths of the 1987 *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid* (plate 10), discussed at length in chapter 4, and Kelley's like-minded series of "manly crafts." His afghan-and-doll sculptures similarly disrupt gender norms by evoking multiple, mutually exclusive cultural connotations—most notably, "feminine" practice and "masculine" minimalist-like form. Yet they also underscore the childhood associations of works such as *More Love Hours*. Exploiting one's inclination to personify such objects, these subsequent works generate an unanticipated emotional potency from otherwise absurd configurations of dilapidated dolls and old, ratty cloth. The effect, as Kelley explains, is irresistible: "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."³⁰ Like children, viewers intuitively project rudimentary story lines onto these arrangements, animating the toys and investing them with human attributes.³¹ Perched on their cozy coverlets, Kelley's creatures appear to be participants in elaborate social situations and odd rituals.

Arena #5 (1990; plate 18) consists of a large yellow blanket on which two E.T. dolls look down upon the stiff, supine corpse of a second alien species. In the

opposite corner of the vast sea of yellow, another E.T. slumps sadly, head down, hands crossed in his lap. Isolated from his extraterrestrial brethren, he appears to have been barred from participating in their mysterious ceremony. In *Arena #7* (1990; plate 19), five plush creatures sit around a square blanket. The scene might initially suggest a friendly picnic, but the ordered arrangement of the dolls and their position around the blanket, rather than on it, indicate a more formal social situation—a meeting, a conference, or perhaps a stuffed-animal summit. On one side, twin Winnie-the-Poohs sit on a tiny wooden bench holding hands. Both have reserved smiles on their faces; one raises its eyebrows. Opposite them, a teddy bear wears a broad goofy grin. To his left, a floppy monkey looks askance at him; to the bear's right, another monkey stares ahead with a prim, astonished expression. Did the teddy just say or do something inappropriate? A distasteful joke? A fart?

The highly composed nature of these works lends an overall formality to the figures' positioning and poses and an unexpected sophistication to their relationships. It is also what makes them humorous. Kelley thought of the dolls as actors on a stage, an approach related to his earlier prop-performances and those of other artists, including McCarthy. In fact, in the early 1980s McCarthy produced a series of paintings—discarded by the artist a few years later—in which he would use a stuffed animal as a paintbrush and then leave it to dry into the surface of the painting. Kelley was one of the few people to visit McCarthy's studio and see this work.³² As he recalls,

Paul was painting onto a large loose canvas laid on the floor, and instead of using a brush to apply the paint he was using stuffed animals tied to a stick. These implements resembled oversized Q-Tips. The painting, as I recall, featured cartoon-like renditions of personified animals in a ship—Noah's Ark I suppose . . . What interested me, particularly, about what Paul was up to was that I sensed some kind of theatrical situation was being set up via the practice of painting. There was a play on the use of the stuffed animals as soft furry objects that could be used as tools to apply paint, but these objects were also characters that reappeared in the painting's "narrative." In my own performance work I was trying to use myself and common objects in an equivalent manner: myself as prop/object as prop and myself as character/objects as characters.³³

Kelley was also drawn to the work of Jack Smith, who likewise used stuffed animals and other common objects as "actors" in his theatrical performances.³⁴ Pregnant with narrative meaning, nearly all of Kelley's Arenas imply structured communities—enigmatic but cohesive. And adult. Clearly the work of a grownup, his precisely composed layouts connote strange fictions that are distinctly unchild-like. This is true even of Kelley's most simple arrangements. In *Arena #3* (1990), for example, two detached heads 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.

That such pathos can be stimulated from these ridiculous assemblages is a testament to the resilience of the personifying instinct. The discomforting effects of the works are the results of adult projections—eros, pity, longing, disgust, dread—onto patently infantile forms. This can be said of nearly all of Kelley's blanket works, even those in which the objects are barely humanoid. In *Innards* (1990), the scattering of

knit doll scraps strewn over a plain white blanket is read as intestines, brain matter, and other grisly globs of viscera. Others similarly suggest tales of brutality and bloodshed, undermining the warm nostalgia their cushy protagonists ordinarily trigger. In *Arena #11* (1990), a hand-stitched stuffed bunny sits before an open book on a crocheted doily-patterned expanse, as if adjudicating some unknown indictment. The book, an old copy of *Roget's Thesaurus*, is open to the entry "VOLITION," subdivided into "Command" on the verso and "Obedience" and "Disobedience" on the recto. Beside the rabbit loom two cans of Raid insecticide, whose dead-animal iconography and hyperbolized tag lines—"PENETRATING VAPOR KILLS BUGS DEAD!"—ensure a swift and ruthless conclusion. *Arena #2* (1990) contains a kangaroo whose baby has been mangled into a blue-and-white-knit intestine or umbilical cord spilling from its mother's pouch. Alongside, two hugging teddy bears are transformed from a symbol of saccharine tenderness to one of trembling fear. Before all of these works, viewers are stuck between cuddliness and peril, cuteness and carnage. Kelley's sculptures reveal just how invested we are in the myth of childhood innocence originally woven into these lumps of yarn, fabric, and stuffing.

Since America's colonial period, children have been prized as harbingers of social and cultural progress, a view that increasingly became central to the country's national identity and ideology.³⁵ In the early nineteenth century, anxieties over the quality of American family life were linked to an apparent decrease in parental authority, and a rich body of child-rearing advice books emerged to fix the problem. Nearly all urged parents to adopt stricter training methods to suppress the inherent depravities of childhood.³⁶ Yet the myth of the virtuous child ultimately superseded such concerns. In 1835 Alexis de Tocqueville observed that Americans see childhood as a time of limitless potential, opened up by a lack of authoritarian constraints and parental domination.³⁷ With the rise of Progressivism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the innate righteousness of the young became an article of faith in the United States, with any bad qualities seen as the results of unwelcome external factors.³⁸ "The spontaneous tendencies of the child are the records of inborn divinity," turn-of-the-century educator Francis Wayland Parker proclaimed, her sentiments echoed by numerous reformers of the time.³⁹ John Dewey promoted the child as a key to social progress, an assertion based on a clear opposition between youth and adulthood.⁴⁰ Whereas Dewey recognized the limitations of spontaneous childhood instincts and the need for socialization, his ideas helped institutionalize a fixed antithesis between the "natural" child and "artificial" society.⁴¹ This opposition persisted well into the 1960s, when Dewey's writings were rediscovered by a like-minded generation of youth-inspired activists.⁴²

As mentioned, however, romanticized childhood has by no means always been a catalyst for liberation, nor has it necessarily translated into an absolute celebration of youth culture in America. To many, the inherently innocent child is unequivocally a victim of popular culture. The 1960s and early-70s counterculture and its successors have been viewed not as perpetuators of juvenile wisdom but as both symptom and cause of an overly permissive society. Indeed, the country's puritan ethos is founded on a myth of the immaculate child, routinely evoked in the name of prudery and piety.⁴³ Here children are considered inherently but precariously chaste, especially subject to the unrelenting threat of sin and thus in need of strict discipline, rigid educational systems, and a restraining social structure.⁴⁴

This premise underlay the resurgence of cultural conservatism in the 1980s. With his “Morning in America” rhetoric, Ronald Reagan put forth a vision of the country reborn as an virtuous child—a symbol for the wholesome values and genuine morality believed to have been abandoned over the previous two decades.⁴⁵ In Reagan’s mythology, the dissolution of the family unit in the 1960s and 70s necessitated a restoration of patriarchal authority in the 1980s.⁴⁶ The NEA controversy, the attorney general’s “Final Report,” and the PMRC’s Senate hearings were among the public manifestations of this ideology: art, pornography, and popular music were all characterized as forms of child abuse.⁴⁷ The innocent child thus endured, but this innocence was increasingly seen as a vulnerability rather a source of visionary energy or radical political thought.

At the same time, sexualized images of children became ever more normalized in America, from common advertisements to Disney movies. The reactionary spectacles on behalf of the innocent in the 1980s and 90s came as the culture was being inundated by images of what Anne Higonnet has termed “knowing children.” Endowed with pronounced psychosexual individuality, these representations posed a challenge to the romantic ideal but also reinforced it, signaling an acute, and ongoing, contemporary crisis in which society clings to myths of childhood innocence while awash in evidence to the contrary. As Higonnet explains: “By the 1990s, the image of the child had become perhaps the most powerfully contradictory image in western consumer culture. Promising the future but also turned nostalgically to the past, trading on innocence but implying sexuality, simultaneously denying and arousing desire, intimate on a mass scale, media spectacles of children are bound to be ambiguous.”⁴⁸

Playing off this ambiguity, Kelley’s assemblages are less about childhood per se than about its misrepresentation in mainstream culture—by both traditionalists and progressives. As he himself puts it, “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.”⁴⁹ The stuffed dolls on display in Kelley’s work exemplify the desire to see children not as they are but as adults would prefer them to be. “The stuffed animal is a pseudo-child,” he explains, “a cutified . . . being that represents the adult’s perfect model of a child.”⁵⁰ This idealization is willfully ignorant and stultifying. It is also inscribed in the basic formal qualities of the toys, whose babylike proportions—large heads, squat torsos, small limbs—complement their soft and fuzzy materials, affectionate gestures, and adorable faces. They are representations of the child as perpetually happy, with an unlimited capacity to give and receive love—safely, that is, sexlessly. Without exception, these surrogates have no genitals. The delusion of infantile sexlessness both ensures “appropriate” parent-child relations and substantiates the need to protect young people from a perverse popular culture. As Kelley points out, this view of the child

is generally a very naïve and antipsychological one. . . . After Freud, we all know that children have sexual drives and all that. So it’s funny to me that a lot of art-world discussion of childhood imagery still centers on the child as innocent instead of talking about the reasons for maintaining that myth. My work is about showing these ideas as adult constructs—the construction of a false innocence, the denying of children their true identity, and the projection on top of that of the romantic idea of the artist as regressive personality.⁵¹

In *Arena #9* (1990; plate 20), an adorable baby-blue bunny with a warm grin and a flower on his belly sits in the center of a large fuzzy blanket. He reaches up for a hug—a sweet, piteous gesture that immediately draws the viewer in. However, closer inspection reveals that his knit body is soiled with crusty yellowish-brown stains, the yarn is frayed, his ears are grimy and tattered, and some stringy material is stuck to his face. The blanket is similarly old and ragged. One doesn't know whether to snuggle or to gag. Like many of Kelley's pseudochildren, this lovingly handmade bunny appears to have been touched and rubbed in inappropriate ways. But other than collecting and arranging these dolls, Kelley did nothing to them. Their grubby surfaces are the results of routine play in which young children shamelessly chew, squeeze, and drool on their toys, happy to leave them caked with bodily fluids, food, and feculence. Transferred from the crib to the gallery, from the world of children to the world of adults, these objects turn perverse: frayed spots become signs of groping, stains become ejaculate, threadbare patches become marks of violation. Everyday use is read as abuse. Such interpretations are, of course, entirely products of viewers' imaginations, which conflate common childhood behavior with sexual deviance. Kelley's Arenas are loci of conflicting forces—adult and infantile, innocent and depraved—embodying the contemporary crisis later theorized by Higonnet. They reflect long-debunked but still persistent childhood myths.

This series relates to a range of demythologized portrayals of children in 1980s and 90s art. Richard Prince's 1983 *Spiritual America*, for example, is an appropriation of Gary Gross's seductive photograph of a nude and prepubescent Brooke Shields. Like the Arenas, Prince's image draws attention to the contradictions of child representation, and the work's extreme ambiguity—its lack of any declared "position" vis-à-vis the knotty issues it raises—is similarly its most discomforting quality.⁵² In Sally Mann's equally controversial 1985 photograph *Popsicle Drips*, the nude torso of the artist's son is virtually identical to Edward Weston's famous 1925 photograph of his son Neil, except that Mann's boy has a liquid suggestively running down his abdomen and thighs. As Higonnet points out, whereas this image provokes fear, "it's fear of what we already have in our mind's eye. We the viewers are the ones that assume the worst."⁵³ Like Kelley's, Mann's vision of childhood "innocence"—of unabashed nudity and melting popsicles—is inevitably corrupted by the adult viewer's anxious sensibility, which perceives depravity where there is none and then recoils at the suggested besmirchment. Yet whereas both Mann and Prince deliberately court controversy by producing or reproducing blatantly troublesome representations of children, Kelley lures his viewers in with cute and cuddly playthings—supposedly the very antithesis of troublesome. The ubiquity and presumed innocence of these objects intensifies the startling effects of the work, as does their tactility, which elicits visceral responses seemingly at odds with their infantile origins.

Works such as Mann's and Prince's also leave the ideal of the innocent child intact. Despite the thorniness of their images, the children in them remain fundamentally chaste—sullied, depending on one's perspective, either by the artist-perpetrator or by the provoked viewer. The most troubling aspect of Kelley's work, however, is not that they make him seem like a pedophile or viewers feel depraved—both of which they do—but that they ultimately point to the child as the true deviant.⁵⁴ As Freud put it, "When . . . anyone has become a gross and manifest pervert, it would be more correct to say that he had *remained* one."⁵⁵ Hardly "in-

nocent,” the blemishes that mark the bodies of these secondhand stuffed animals are actual signs of sensual (i.e., sexual) gratification, which is what children most often use their plush toys for.⁵⁶ As an idealized representation of the child that also serves as an erotic object for a child, the dirty doll is profoundly paradoxical—an embodiment of polluted ideals. Its stains and tatters evidence the very sexuality that its sanitized form is designed to conceal.⁵⁷ Kelley’s series draws attention not only to our enduring tendency to detect “perverse” drives where there are none but to deny them where they are rampant.

Other works from this period actually restore this effaced sexuality. *Arena #10* (1990), for example, features a small beret-wearing walrus perched atop a giant weepy tomato character. The pair presides over a procession of four autograph dogs, a door snake, and a stuffed seal, all lined up back to front. The still-legible preteen prose on the bodies of the dogs—“Have fun at your new school. Love, Dawn”—underscores the presumed innocence of these mementos and handmade keepsakes, here transformed into a scene of animal voyeurism and humping hounds doing it “doggy-style.”

Plush Kundalini and Chakra Set (1987) consists 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 of focal points or chakras. Once the ascent is complete, the individual supposedly experiences the union of the god Shiva and his goddess Parvati.⁵⁸ In Kelley’s construction this pinnacle is preposterously represented by a large, multicolored orb of dolls atop the enormous serpent. As he 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.”⁵⁹

In his 1991 “Lumpenprole” installation, two stuffed bears hang from the ceiling—one upside down with a vaginal stripe rubbed into the fur between its legs, and the other with penile forms attached to its crotch and chest. Here Kelley literally, and clumsily, returned to his creatures what had been taken from them. *E.T.’s Long Neck, Two Brains, Penis, and Scrotum* (1989) is a lewd ten-foot-tall personage with an E.T. head, a plush banana torso, and genitals made from a grinning frog flanked by two fuzzy footballs. A recurring character in Kelley’s work, E.T. was the preeminent model of idealized childhood in the 1980s; the movie is founded on a strict opposition between cynical adults and indefatigably hopeful children. To Kelley, “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 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.”⁶⁰

Manipulating Mass-Produced Idealized Objects and Nostalgic Depiction of the Innocence of Childhood are photographic stills from Kelley’s 1990 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 feces-smeared genitals and buttocks against smaller furry friends.⁶¹ 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. (The performers actually exhibit a type of fetishism called “plushophilia,” in which adults use stuffed dolls as objects of sexual pleasure.)⁶² What is benign and routine in children is considered utterly depraved when replicated by adults—a contradiction accentuated by Kelley’s captionlike titles. “Manipulating Mass-Produced Idealized Objects” points out that such toys are the products of commercialism and cultural ideals rather than innate infantile inclinations. “Nostalgic Depiction of the Innocence of Childhood” reminds us that the perverse behavior depicted in the image derives from supposedly innocent children. Like his stuffed sculptures, Kelley’s photographs explicitly resexualize explicitly desexualized forms.

McCarthy similarly acts like a child, shamelessly sully everything in his path. Nearly all of his food-flinging frenzies involve a conscious regression to anal existence, in which his obvious adulthood clashes with the childish personas he adopts. Along with the stuffed-animal paintings that Kelley saw in his studio, McCarthy has regularly used soiled toys and debased renditions of American childhood icons to challenge myths of childhood innocence. In performances such as *Class Fool* (1976), *Grand Pop* (1977), *Doctor* (1978), *Contemporary Cure All* (1979), and *Monkey Man* (1980), he systematically soiled plastic dolls with a variety of condiments that stood for “dirty” body fluids. In *Baby Boy, Baby Magic* (1982; plate 21) he dressed in a diaper and a giant baby-head mask and performed a host of infantile activities—spinning around until dizzy, banging his head into a wall and table, playing with dolls, rubbing his penis, smashing his face in his food, eating with his hands, and “defecating” hamburger meat—all while limiting his vocabulary to grunts, groans, and gags.⁶³ In *Mother Pig* (1983; plate 22) he faux-urinated on a cuddly bright orange lion, squirting it with a ketchup bottle held at his crotch. In *Popeye, Judge and Jury* (1983) he fondled a floppy stuffed bunny, rubbing various food products into its increasingly grubby fur. For his 1992 *Propo* series, McCarthy photographed many of the besmirched toys that remained from his earlier performances and videos. Dense with crud, each object is presented individually against a brightly colored background. A grimy female doll stands defiantly, hands on her hips, a large phallus dangling between her legs; a headless male body has his shorts slipping provocatively off his waist; a rubber Donald Duck is coated in brown muck. Colossal in scale, these portraits encapsulate two decades of work that, much like Kelley’s assemblages, forces adult fantasies about childhood into conflict with truly childish behavior.

McCarthy’s *Spaghetti Man* (1993) is an eight-foot-tall pantless mutant with a furry rabbit’s head, no eyes, and a humanoid body that resembles a plastic toy figurine. Along with a bright yellow T-shirt, the figure sports a forty-foot flaccid phallus unfurled on the floor beneath him. Combining two versions of the idealized child—the stuffed animal and the doll—McCarthy has defiled both, fragmenting and resexualizing them. “Dolls and other cuddly creatures are not supposed to have giant penises,” Ralph Rugoff notes in reference to this work, “but once we have been impressed with the size of their members, wouldn’t they look ‘funny’



6.9.

Paul McCarthy, *Bear and Rabbit*, 1991.
Courtesy the artist
and Hauser & Wirth.

(e.g. castrated) without them?”⁶⁴ *Spaghetti Man* recalls the childhood delight in mixing and destroying, expressions of infantile imagination not bound by social propriety. Indeed, upon receiving a new toy, the child is usually first inclined to dismantle it, dirty it, mutilate it, or otherwise “misuse” it—often to his or her parents’ dismay. McCarthy’s 1994 *Tomato Heads* (plate 23) is a takeoff on Mr. Potato Head, a toy specifically designed to satisfy this destructive instinct in a more controlled, parentally acceptable way. The sculptural installation consists of three giant-sized doll-like figures with tomato heads and numerous holes into which various parts can be pegged. Along with the customary eyes, ears, noses, and mouths, these parts include penises and vaginas along with gardening tools, silverware, enormous carrots, and bright blue and yellow blocks. (Some have been affixed to the three toys; the rest are strewn across the floor.) The figures have holes in their crotches and buttocks into which various objects have been inserted.

In *Bear and Rabbit* (1991; fig. 6.9), stuffed-animal-like figures are similarly transformed from G- to X-rated. The two furry friends are perched atop a Formica

pedestal in an erotic, back-to-front embrace, as if the latter were being humped by the former. Their conventionally cutesy faces and cuddly bodies are contorted into expressions of orgasmic arousal: the rabbit's open mouth, raised brow, and outstretched arms are a paroxysm of pleasure and pain; the bear's gaping grin and glassy-eyed expression suggest ejaculatory release. McCarthy's *Skunks* (1993) stand on fake tree stumps, eyes bulging and mouths open, masturbating protracted penile appendages. About six feet tall and exhibiting distinctly adult proportions, these works refer less to children's toys than to the lovable characters that welcome visitors to Disneyland and its various theme-park derivatives—another uniquely American manifestation of idealized adult-child relations. If stuffed animals are surrogate babies, such characters are surrogate parents—dotting, eternally affectionate, and of course sexless. As McCarthy recalls: “Someone once told me that a kid was in the back lot of Disneyland and saw a mascot squirrel or chipmunk with its mask off, smoking a cigarette. It terrified him. After that, the kid had nightmares, and the parents ended up suing Disneyland. The dream had been broken.”⁶⁵ McCarthy essentially reenacts this scenario, similarly rupturing the ideal by revealing what literally lies beneath it. The phalluses of his well-endowed skunks are clearly adult and human, extending as if from inside a costume. Such depraved tableaux suggest what these fantasyland performers might do at the end of the day when the children have at last gone home.

In the mid-1990s McCarthy began using such costumes in madcap video adaptations of archetypal childhood tales. *Santa Chocolate Shop* (1996–97) features an increasingly disturbing Christmas orgy in which actors dressed in elf costumes and furry reindeer suits hump and “defecate” chocolate syrup on each other. One of these reindeer has a hole strategically cut in his costume, revealing his real grownup genitals. The 1994 video performance *Pinocchio Pipenose Housedilemma* refers less to Carlo Collodi's original story than to the 1940 Disney animation, an American coming-of-age classic in which the puppet boy's quest to become human is fulfilled through the acquisition of delayed gratification and bodily self-control.⁶⁶ McCarthy's *Pinocchio* cuts a hole in the crotch of his cartoonish getup and inserts a large white stuffed snake, restoring his own missing member. He then proceeds to torture his stuffed toys, dousing them with ketchup-blood, and to use his famously extendable nose as a phallus, poking it through various holes in the walls and rhythmically thrusting it into a jar of mayonnaise, spewing forth the semenlike substance with each push.⁶⁷ As Giancinto Di Pietrantonio explains, “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.”⁶⁸ As mentioned in chapter 1, the artist has required viewers of both *Santa Chocolate Shop* and *Pinocchio Pipenose Housedilemma* to don the costumes worn in the videos, underscoring the fact that the fantasies to which these works refer say more about adults than about children.⁶⁹

To McCarthy, infancy is a time of raging sexual and violent tendencies, and his “regressions” have always involved a resurfacing of these tendencies. Neither innocent nor visionary, the child is a savage. McCarthy also makes it emphatically clear that perversity is simply a carryover of normal childhood behavior into adulthood. Society's invisible systems of conditioning are designed to prevent this carryover

by training individuals to sublimate their urges into acceptable conduct. Though seemingly at odds with the myth of childhood innocence, this myth of childhood savagery also resurfaced in the 1980s and 90s. Some, for instance, saw childhood as an amoral state of barbarity, of raw passions and sexual desires that must be properly “domesticated”—a task claimed to have been abandoned in the 1960s. The culprit may be America’s overly permissive society, but the forces that threaten children are their own. The danger is from within.

THE (DE)CIVILIZING PROCESS

While McCarthy demystifies childhood instincts, he also portrays the subjugation of those instincts as no less problematic. In *Cultural Gothic* and *The Garden*, this subjugation is itself perverse. Standards of masculinity and patterns of male dominance are portrayed as products of systematic and obligatory indoctrination. In *Family Tyranny* (1987), a video-performance collaboration with Kelley, such indoctrination is physically and psychologically traumatic. Subtitled *Modeling and Molding* and set in a wood-paneled basement, *Family Tyranny* can be firmly linked to Kelley and McCarthy’s early interest in R. D. Laing’s notion of social conditioning as tyrannical and depraved. As Laing wrote in the 1960s:

Long before a thermonuclear war can come about, we have had to lay waste our own sanity. We begin with the children. It is imperative to catch them in time. Without the most thorough and rapid brainwashing their dirty minds would see through our dirty tricks. Children are not yet fools, but we shall turn them into imbeciles like ourselves, with high I.Q.s if possible. . . . From the moment of birth, when the Stone Age baby confronts the twentieth-century mother, the baby is subjected to these forces of violence, called love, as its mother and father, and their parents and their parents before them, have been. These forces are mainly concerned with destroying most of its potentialities, and on the whole this enterprise is successful.⁷⁰

Family Tyranny dramatizes this socializing enterprise, transforming a cliché of father-son bonding into a traumatic lesson in ritualized abuse. In the opening scene, a shirtless father (played by McCarthy) punishes his son—actually a Styrofoam head on a stick—for being a “very bad boy.” “My daddy did this to me; you can do this to your son,” he repeatedly chants while driving a funnel into the boy’s mouth and forcing a lumpy mayonnaise-based concoction down his throat. As in many of his works dating back to the mid-1970s, force-feeding is a metaphor for acculturation. Later in the video the son is played by Kelley, who tries desperately to flee this sadistic paternal process (fig. 6.10). “You’re gonna be sorry you have me for a dad when I get through,” the father warns his son, who will obviously never escape. The home is a prison in which children are forcibly conditioned by their parents. In the final scene the child takes the form of a plastic doll (fig. 6.11). “I’m soooorry; I’m soooo sorry,” the maniacal father moans while molesting “daddy’s little boy.” As Philip Monk has noted, the video presents “a household where the reproduction of authority . . . [is] replayed and passed on in family (sexual) abuse.”⁷¹

In Kelley and McCarthy’s 1991 video collaboration *Heidi* (plate 24), child protagonists Heidi and Peter must endure their grandfather’s similarly demented



6.10.

Paul McCarthy (with Mike Kelley), *Family Tyranny*, 1987. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth and Kelley Studio, Inc.

socialization regimen. The video is a freewheeling, hilarious, and terrifying 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 Johanna Spyri's narrative, their disturbing interactions transform the enchanting morality tale into a lewd, multilayered grotesque, steeped in child abuse and scatology. Peter and Heidi exhibit a range of perversities—incest, scopophilia, bestiality, sadomasochism—and must be broken by their authoritarian father figure. However, the means by which these feral children are tamed are themselves sick and twisted; the cure, it seems, is as bad as the disease. For example, Heidi and Grandfather brutally toilet train the young Peter. Standing beside the child's bare buttocks (actually a rubber prosthesis), they force him to pass a series of increasingly larger fecal foods—chocolate milk, sausage, salami—through his rectum into a pot. When the meat gets stuck in Peter's bowels, Heidi and Grandfather dispassionately slice open his supple anal skin and shove them through. Meanwhile, an overlaying monologue calmly tells the story of an uncontrollable three-hundred-pound retarded man with "the mind of a small child," who would habitually masturbate into beheaded dolls and use his own shit as lubricant. Kelley and McCarthy juxtapose the civilizing process—which begins with the manipulation and monitoring of basic bodily functions and ends with the refusal and sublimation of deep desires—with its extreme malfunction. And as the monologue makes clear, that process at once assures the marginalization of those who fail and generates the fantasies of those who succeed: confined to a mental hospital, the "big boy" was, we are told, also an unwitting celebrity for rich matrons who secretly came to marvel at him.

Heidi reveals the psychosexual chaos at the heart of socialization. It not only explodes the rigid binaries underlying the original story but upends both the



6.11.

Paul McCarthy (with Mike Kelley), *Family Tyranny*, 1987. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth Kelley Studio, Inc.

primitivist adulation of childhood and its pedophobic counterextreme. Throughout the video Spyri's antimodernist glorification of nature as the cure for a sick culture is juxtaposed to Viennese architect Adolf Loos's 1908 ultramodernist manifesto "Ornament and Crime," which essentially inverts Spyri's formula. The video's Swiss chalet set is overlaid on one side with the facade of Loos's American Bar in Vienna, and his tract is repeatedly cited throughout the work. Arguing that humanity's primitive instincts must be suppressed in the name of civilization, Loos aligned the "amoral" child with the uncivilized and the criminal.⁷² In one of the video's early scenes, 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!" The two critters celebrate nature as the antithesis to, as they put it, the "cheap theatrics, facade, and lies" of culture, yet the gravity of their rumination is neutralized 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.

On the whole, *Heidi* is a riotous send-up of romanticized nature. With its violent overtones and cheap B-movie histrionics—maniacal laughter, monstrous groans, distorted sounds, and campy slow-motion effects—the video also caricatures a myth perpetuated by American horror films in which, as McCarthy himself puts it, "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."⁷³ Here the countryside is barbaric and perilous, a place where feeble-minded hicks engage in a host of abominations. Romanticized nature and demonized nature are as entangled as the hybrid architecture of the set itself. Peter is both an innocent child and an imbecile,



6.12.

Raymond Pettibon,
No Title (All my
groupies), *Bottomless
Pond*, p. 4, 1986.

Courtesy Regen
Projects, Los Angeles
© Raymond Pettibon.

Grandfather a parental guardian and a deranged hillbilly, and the entire family at once sick and healthy, criminal and just.

Pettibon's counterculture works similarly critique the exaltation of "natural" desire as an antidote to a repressive and corrupt culture, while other drawings demythologize childhood as represented in American popular culture at large. On a page from the 1983 *Bottomless Pond* (fig. 6.12) a grinning Mickey Mouse has dropped

his pants, displaying an adult human penis. “ALL MY GROUPIES ARE 9, 10 YEARS OLD AT THE MOST,” he explains. Anticipating McCarthy’s 1990s sculptures and videos, this work similarly ruptures the Disneyland ethos, exposing the Mickey Mouse impersonator for what he really is: an adult performing an adult fantasy. 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 unbearably offensive. One’s revulsion attests to the absolute sanctity of the ideals Pettibon perverts and to the enduring denial of that which those ideals conceal. This drawing betrays exactly what society’s most ubiquitous symbols of childhood are designed to suppress—namely, the fundamental psychosexual relationship between children and adults. Pettibon shamelessly transforms a model of youthful purity and idealized parent-child relations into one of pedophilia and, even more shockingly, its requital. As a surrogate adult, Mickey Mouse loves children, and they love him. Though Pettibon clearly exaggerates this mutual affection to the point of aberration, there is an underlying truth here. Not only are parental expressions of love derived from adult sexual life, but as Freud explains, “a child’s intercourse with anyone responsible for his care affords him an unending source of sexual excitation and satisfaction.”⁷⁴

Pettibon’s booklets are full of kids flaunting their sexuality. In another drawing from *Capricious Missives* a child glares out from the page, thrusting four fingers in the viewer’s face. “I MASTURBATED FOUR TIMES TODAY,” she brags. “I’M TOO YOUNG TO WRITE BOOKS, YOU KNOW.” On the opposing page, a young girl asks her lover to “WAKE ME WITH YOUR BIG LOVE IN THE MORNING” as she falls off to sleep. In the 1983 *Virgin Fears* a nude prepubescent girl seductively smiles at the viewer beneath a sign that reads “VIRGIN-LIKE INNOCENCE.” In *Bottomless Pond* (1986) a schoolgirl smokes a cigarette while being held from behind by an older man. “MY MOM SAYS I HAVE TO WAIT TILL I’M 12 TO SMOKE,” she tells him.

Pettibon often places such drawings alongside the work of actual children, specifically his young niece and nephews. Two works from *Capricious Missives* are by a nephew who signed them “Alex F.” In one, a grinning, gun-wielding snowman is coupled with a toddler-scrawled caption explaining, “SNOWMAN HAS A MASK HE IS GOING TO THE STORE TO STEAL SOME FOOD.” The other is less comical, featuring a bleeding, blobbish figure and a dour description: “MOMMY CAME HOME FROM THE HOSPITAL WITHOUT BABY SISTER.” More commonly Pettibon includes the work of Nelson Tarpenny, who began contributing drawings to his uncle’s zines at age five.⁷⁵ In sardonic deference to the boy’s brutal expressionism, Pettibon has referred to him as his “mentor.”⁷⁶ *Bottomless Pond* allocates ten of its twenty-eight pages to drawings by “Master Tarpenny,” 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.” These drawings exemplify what was typically overlooked by Pettibon’s primitivist predecessors, for whom childlike style was a purer form of expression. Yet many of the texts that augment Tarpenny’s doodles are suspiciously, if not impossibly, mature. Despite the juvenile handwriting and prevalent misspellings, they had to have been dictated to the young nephew by his impious uncle. “I miss some of my intelligence,” reads the caption to a crude sketch of a crying man (fig. 6.13). “I wish I never sniffed glue.” Indignation against the grown-up artist rings hollow, however, in light of the child’s accompanying

6.13.

Raymond Pettibon, No
Title (I miss some),
Bottomless Pond, p.
21, 1986. Courtesy
Regen Projects, Los
Angeles © Raymond
Pettibon.



drawings, which not only complement Pettibon's texts but are at least as vicious and vulgar. These works may feel improper and exploitative to those who see them as incompatible with a five-year-old imagination, but they derive from a true collaboration. Like Kelley and McCarty, Pettibon underscores the fact that what seems perverse in adulthood is actually a regression to the indecencies of childhood.⁷⁷

For Pettibon too, the generational—and largely imperceptible—processes of “domestication” that bring such infantile instincts under control are themselves depraved. In another drawing from *Bottomless Pond* (1986) a naked man holds up a naked 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.” A year later Kelley and McCarthy’s *Family Tyranny* would echo this sentiment (“my

daddy did this to me; you can do this to your son"). Socialization may safeguard civilization, but only at the expense of its ward.

Viewing American parenthood and childhood—and particularly male parent-child relations—as ciphers for American values at large, all three artists present the “civilizing process” as society’s most essential agent of control, effective because it is concealed by the commonest of habits, gestures, and daily rituals. That process not only fixes gender, sexual, and other behavioral norms but naturalizes them. As Erik Erikson put it, “As the school child makes methods his own, he also permits accepted methods to make him their own.”⁷⁸ Exposing the internal contradictions and hypocrisies of this process, Kelley, McCarthy, and Pettibon treat civility, morality, and normalcy as relative and largely symbolic—that is, as key ideological buttresses for society’s most essential power relations. And by targeting childhood, they implicate the family as the dominant institution responsible for reinforcing those relations. Pressing viewers to directly confront what they would prefer to ignore, these artists wreak havoc with idealized notions of childhood.

Yet such transgression is not their ultimate objective. As Ralph Rugoff points out about McCarthy, “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.”⁷⁹ Likewise, 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 these losers are subversive in ways that more typical youth rebels 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. Pettibon’s suicidal, murderous, and hypersexual teens similarly satirize America’s childcentrism, 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 constitute 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 allows them to deal most directly with the fundamental relationship of human nature to culture. This is also why adolescence is particularly prominent in their oeuvres, since it is then that the two sides are in greatest conflict. Inherently contradictory beings, adolescents are the penultimate battlegrounds between desire and restraint—between nature and culture. They are ready-made case studies in the ordeal of conditioning. And despite their apparent defiance, youth-based subcultures are an integral part of this normalization process. They serve as transitions to adulthood, supplying temporary ideals, leaders, and guidelines that assuage teenage identity crises while providing models for proper social functioning.⁸⁰ Indeed, the participant is much less of a threat than the isolated misfit.⁸¹ The hippie or the punk is more likely to become a genteel member of society than the proverbial pants shitter.

That the forces of conditioning are ubiquitous and inescapable, pervading both center and so-called margin, both mainstream and subculture, may seem like a defeatist resignation. Yet as Peter Sloterdijk contends, this is actually the only constructive outlook to be had, for it disqualifies the continued advancement of idealistic enterprises, deeply cynical because their proponents should (and often do) know them to be unfeasible. In opposition to what Sloterdijk calls “enlightened false consciousness”—the truly defeatist outlook—the work of Kelley, McCarthy, and Pettibon concedes the 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 decivilizing process.

As discussed at the opening of this book, Kelley’s 1988 *Pay for Your Pleasure* is paradigmatic in both message and approach. Originally installed in a university hallway and designed to resemble college-event announcements, it is positioned against both the locale and the 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 arguably 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 reevaluation of one’s own hypocritical ideals.

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 nonetheless attempts to reinvigorate cultural discourse. Its didacticism stems from eliciting fresh internal debates rather than preaching stale opinions. And grotesque 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.”⁸²

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 accepted morals are. Despite society’s investment in them, many of our most sacred ideals cannot withstand Kelley’s, McCarthy’s, and Pettibon’s grotesque trials-by-humor. The discomfort and anxiety experienced before their work is the result of booby traps set within it. Stuck without viable solutions, viewers are forced into reassessment. They are made to pay dearly for their pleasures.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

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

2. *Pay for Your Pleasure* was originally part of the exhibition *Three Projects: Half a Man, From My Institution to Yours, Pay for Your Pleasure*, 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, per Kelley's instructions.

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

4. Mike Kelley, "Three Projects: *Half a Man, From My Institution to Yours, Pay for Your Pleasure*" (1988), reprinted in Mike Kelley, *Minor Histories: Statements, Conversations, Proposals*, ed. John C. Welchman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 18.

5. Singerman, "Mike Kelley's Line," 9.

6. 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, "Mike Kelley's Line," 10). I would argue that the goal is in fact the opposite: to make the wedge between theory and practice immovable and irresolvable.

7. Kelley, "Three Projects," 18.

8. 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.).

9. Mike Kelley, "Mike Kelley: Form and Disfunction," interview by Robert Sentinry, *Zone Magazine* 1, no. 2 (1994): 15.

10. Paul McCarthy, interview by Linda Burnham, *High Performance* 8, no. 1 (1985): 42.

11. 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 antihero 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 Vincent Bugliosi with Curt Gentry, *Helter Skelter: The True Story of the Manson Murders* (New York: Bantam Books, 1974).

12. For a thorough discussion of the NEA controversy, see Steven C. Dubin, *Arresting Images: Impolitic Art and Uncivil Actions* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

13. Anthony Julius, *Transgressions: The Offences of Art* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 26.

14. Robert Buck, preface to *The Play of the Unmentionable: An Installation by Joseph Kosuth at the Brooklyn Museum* (New York: New Press, 1992), x.

15. Julius, *Transgressions*, 50.

16. Mike Kelley, interview by Thomas Kellein, in *Mike Kelley, Thomas Kellein: A Conversation* (Ostfildern, Germany: Cantz Verlag, 1994), 27.

17. Michael André Bernstein, *Bitter Carnival: "Ressentiment" and the Abject Hero* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).
18. Paul Schimmel, "California Pluralism and the Birth of the Postmodern Era," in *Under the Big Black Sun: California Art 1974–1981*, ed. Lisa Gabrielle Mark and Paul Schimmel, exhibition catalogue (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Munich: DelMonico Books/Prestel, 2011), 16.
19. James Combs, *The Reagan Range: The Nostalgia Myth in American Politics* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1993), 44.
20. Mark Lilla, "A Tale of Two Reactions," *New York Review of Books* 45, no. 8 (May 14, 1998), <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/857> (accessed September 5, 2006).
21. Raymond Pettibon, interview by Art:21 (2003), <http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/pettibon/clip2.html> (accessed November 20, 2008).
22. Sonhya Sayres, Anders Stephanson, Stanley Aronowitz, and Fredric Jameson, eds., *The 60s without Apology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 8.
23. Ibid.
24. Mike Kelley: *Catholic Tastes* (1993) was organized by the Whitney Museum of American Art and also appeared at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Modern Museet, Stockholm (catalogue: Elisabeth Sussman et al., *Mike Kelley: Catholic Tastes* [New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993]). *Paul McCarthy* (2000) was organized by the New Museum of Contemporary Art and also appeared at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (catalogue: Lisa Philips, Dan Cameron, Amelia Jones, and Anthony Vidler, *Paul McCarthy* [New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 2000]). *Raymond Pettibon* (1998) was organized by the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, appearing at both venues and at the Drawing Center, New York, and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (catalogue: Ann Temkin and Hamza Walker, eds., *Raymond Pettibon: A Reader* [Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1998]).
25. Paul Schimmel, *Helter Skelter: LA Art in the 1990s*, ed. Catherine Gudis (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1992), 17. Schimmel recently revisited the work of these artists and others in his 2011–12 exhibition *Under the Big Black Sun: California Art 1974–1981* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, the Geffen Contemporary MOCA (see Mark and Schimmel, *Under the Big Black Sun*).
26. Ralph Rugoff, "Mr. McCarthy's Neighborhood," in Rugoff, Kristine Stiles, and Giacinto Di Pietrantonio, *Paul McCarthy* (London: Phaidon, 1996), 32–87.
27. John C. Welchman, "The Mike Kelleys," in *Mike Kelley* (London: Phaidon, 1999), 44–93.
28. Robert Storr, "'You Are What You Read': Words and Pictures by Raymond Pettibon," in Storr et al., *Raymond Pettibon* (London: Phaidon, 2001), 34–73.
29. Ibid., 42.
30. 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.
31. Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997), 248–51.
32. In addition to *Formless: A User's Guide*, see, for example, Craig Houser et al., *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993); Pamela M. Lee, "Mike Kelley's Name Dropping," *Word & Image* 11, no. 3 (July–September 1995): 300–319; and Hal Foster, "Obscene, Abject, Traumatic," *October*, no. 77 (Summer 1996): 106–24.
33. 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 (see, for example, Pettibon's interview by Ulrich Loock in *Raymond Pettibon*, ed. Ulrich Loock [Bern: Kunsthalle Bern, 1995], 94; or the artist's interview by Dennis Cooper in Storr et al., *Raymond Pettibon*, 13–15). For a recent, somewhat more nuanced look at Pettibon's connection to music, see Thomas Crow, "The Art of the Fugitive in 1970s Los Angeles: Runaway Self-Consciousness," in *Under the Big Black Sun*, ed. Mark and Schimmel, 58–60. Kelley's musical endeavors have drawn interest due to the release of both old and new re-

cordings in the early 2000s, 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. Two brief articles that do address these issues are David Marsh's "Mike Kelley and Detroit" (in Sussman et al., *Mike Kelley: Catholic Tastes*, 39–42) and Kim Gordon's "Is It My Body?" (in Sussman et al., *Mike Kelley: Catholic Tastes*, 175–82). McCarthy's music and musical affiliations are acknowledged in the scholarship on the artist only rarely, and then only in passing (see, for example, Rugoff's "Mr. McCarthy's Neighborhood," 37).

34. 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> (accessed November 1, 2008).

35. Branden W. Joseph, *Beyond the Dream Syndicate: Tony Conrad and the Arts After Cage* (A "Minor" History) (New York: Zone Books, 2008), 51.

36. *Ibid.*, 20.

37. Thomas Crow, "LA Stories: A Roundtable Discussion," *Artforum International* 50, no. 2 (October 2011), 240.

38. The idea of rethinking Los Angeles art (and contemporary art history in general) in terms of site specificity, rather than regionalism, was recently suggested by Meyer in "LA Stories," 240.

39. Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grottesque in Art and Literature*, trans. Ulrich Weisstein (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 185, 59.

40. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986).

41. Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *On the Grottesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), 3.

42. *Ibid.*, 14.

43. *Ibid.*, 71.

44. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

45. Harpham, *On the Grottesque*, 72.

46. Thomas McEvelley, "Art in the Dark," *Artforum International* 21, no. 10 (Summer 1983): 66.

47. Paul McCarthy, "There's a Big Difference between Ketchup and Blood," interview by Marc Selwyn, reprinted in Rugoff, Stiles, and Di Pietrantonio, *Paul McCarthy* (Phaidon), 134.

48. Roger Malbert, "Exaggeration and Degradation: Grottesque Humour in Contemporary Art," in *Carnavalesque*, exhibition catalogue (London: Hayward Gallery, 2000), 93.

49. Umberto Eco, "The Frames of Comic 'Freedom,'" in *Carnival!*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok, Umberto Eco, and V. V. Ivanov (Berlin: Mouton, 1984), 2.

50. *Ibid.*, 8.

51. Charles Baudelaire, "On the Essence of Laughter, and Generally of the Comic in the Plastic Arts," in *Charles Baudelaire: Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, trans. P. E. Charvet (London: Penguin Books, 1972), 140–61.

52. *Ibid.*, 141.

53. Robert Storr, *Disparities and Deformities: Our Grottesque*, exhibition catalogue for SITE Santa Fe's Fifth International Biennial (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 2004), 16.

54. Mike Kelley, "Foul Perfection: Thoughts on Caricature," reprinted in Kelley, *Foul Perfection: Essays and Criticism*, ed. John C. Welchman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 28.

55. Harpham, *On the Grottesque*, 5.

56. *Ibid.*, 3.

57. Mike Kelley, quoted in Peter Schjeldahl, "Mike Kelley," in *Hydrogen Jukebox: Selected Writings of Peter Schjeldahl, 1978–1990* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 302.

58. Todd Gitlin, *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America Is Wracked by Culture Wars* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1995), 33–35.

59. Andreas Huyssen, "Foreword: The Return of Diogenes as Postmodern Intellectual," in Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Edred (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), xi.

60. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 5–6.
61. *Ibid.*, 82, 288.
62. *Ibid.*, 101, 105.
63. Huyssen, foreword, x.

CHAPTER ONE

1. Paul McCarthy, interview by Chrissie Iles, in *Paul McCarthy: Central Symmetrical Rotation Movement—Three Installations, Two Films*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2008), 57.
2. Paul McCarthy, interview by Linda M. Montano, in *Performance Artists Talking in the Eighties*, comp. Montano (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 97.
3. Paul McCarthy, conversation with the author, August 16, 2010.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. Paul McCarthy, “There’s a Big Difference between Ketchup and Blood,” interview by Marc Selwyn, reprinted in Rugoff, Stiles, and Di Pietrantonio, *Paul McCarthy* (Phaidon) 128.
10. Quoted in Suzanne Muchnic, “This Is How He Grew to Be Unclean,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 24, 2008, <http://articles.latimes.com/2008/feb/24/entertainment/ca-mccarthy24/2> (accessed June 20, 2010).
11. Paul McCarthy, conversation with the author, August 16, 2010.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Paul McCarthy, “Paul McCarthy: The Clown Speaks,” interview by Christophe Kihm, *Art Press* 336 (July–August 2007): 31–33.
14. McCarthy, interview by Iles, 59.
15. Paul McCarthy, conversation with Allan Kaprow at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2000. Audio recording of the conversation at <http://www.moca.org/audio/> (accessed June 22, 2010).
16. See McCarthy, “Paul McCarthy: The Clown Speaks,” 31; and Ralph Rugoff, “Mr. McCarthy’s Neighborhood,” in Rugoff, Kristine Stiles, and Giacinto Di Pietrantonio, *Paul McCarthy* (London: Phaidon, 1996) 37.
17. Allan Kaprow, *Assemblage, Environments and Happenings* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1966), 195–96.
18. McCarthy, interview by Iles, 59.
19. Chrissie Iles, “Baroque, Modern, Vertiginous, Existential: Paul McCarthy and the Politics of Space,” in *Paul McCarthy* (Whitney), 11.
20. *Ibid.*
21. McCarthy, conversation with the author, August 16, 2010.
22. See Metzger’s manifestos in Gustav Metzger et al., *gustav metzger: “damaged nature, auto-destructive art”* (Nottingham, UK: Russell, 1996), 59–63.
23. McCarthy, conversation with the author, August 16, 2010.
24. Daniel Baird, “Paul McCarthy-ism,” *Brooklyn Rail*, May–June 2001, <http://www.brooklyn-rail.org/2001/05/art/paul-mccarthy-ism> (accessed June 22, 2010).
25. Paul McCarthy, “The McCarthy Triangle,” interview by Jens Hoffmann and Stacen Berg, in *Paul McCarthy’s Low Life Slow Life*, exhibition catalogue (San Francisco: California College of the Arts; Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag: 2010), 592–93.
26. McCarthy, conversation with the author, August 16, 2010.
27. McCarthy, “Paul McCarthy: The Clown Speaks,” 31.
28. *Ibid.*, 33.
29. McCarthy, conversation with the author, August 16, 2010.
30. McCarthy, “There’s a Big Difference between Ketchup and Blood,” 128.

31. Barbara Smith, "Paul McCarthy," *Journal: Southern California Art Magazine* 21 (January-February 1979): 47.
32. Rugoff, "Mr. McCarthy's Neighborhood," 37.
33. McCarthy, conversation with the author, August 16, 2010.
34. McCarthy, interview by Iles, 59–60.
35. Iles, "Baroque, Modern, Vertiginous, Existential," 43.
36. McCarthy, conversation with the author, August 16, 2010.
37. Iles, "Baroque, Modern, Vertiginous, Existential," 34.
38. Chrissie Iles, preface to *Paul McCarthy* (Whitney), 6.
39. McCarthy, "Paul McCarthy: The Clown Speaks," 33.
40. McCarthy, conversation with the author, August 16, 2010.
41. McCarthy, conversation with Kaprow.
42. Hunter Drohojowska-Philp, "It's Not Shocking to Him," *Los Angeles Times*, November 05, 2000, <http://articles.latimes.com/2000/nov/05/entertainment/ca-47190/4> (accessed 06/20/2010).
43. McCarthy, conversation with Kaprow.
44. For a good overview of the Feminist Art Program, see Faith Wilding, *By Our Own Hands: The Women Artist's Movement, Southern California, 1970–1976* (Santa Monica, CA: Double X, 1977).
45. McCarthy, conversation with the author, August 16, 2010.
46. Rugoff, "Mr. McCarthy's Neighborhood," 37.
47. These and other "Instructions" are printed in *Paul McCarthy* (Phaidon), 106–8.
48. Kaprow, *Assemblage, Environments and Happenings*, 243–45.
49. McCarthy, "Paul McCarthy: The Clown Speaks," 31.
50. Kaprow, *Assemblage, Environments and Happenings*, 207–8.
51. Allan Kaprow, "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock," in *Kaprow, Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. Jeff Kelley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 1–9.
52. Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 148–72.
53. McCarthy, interview by Kristine Stiles, in *Paul McCarthy* (Phaidon), 25.
54. Lane Relyea, "A Few Words for DEAD H," *Parkett* 73 (May 2005): 104.
55. McCarthy, "Paul McCarthy: The Clown Speaks," 33.
56. McCarthy, interview by Stiles, 27–28.
57. *Ibid.*, 14.
58. Dan Cameron, "The Mirror Stage," in *Paul McCarthy*, exhibition catalogue (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 2000), 60.
59. McCarthy, conversation with the author, August 16, 2010.
60. *Ibid.*
61. R. D. Laing, *The Politics of Experience* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1967), 28, 73.
62. McCarthy, conversation with the author, August 16, 2010.
63. Smith, "Paul McCarthy," 45.
64. *Ibid.*, 45–46.
65. Linda Frye Burnham, "Performance Art in Southern California: An Overview" (1980), in *Performance Anthology: Source Book for a Decade of California Performance Art*, ed. Carl E. Loeffler and Darlene Tong (San Francisco: Contemporary Arts, 1980), 419.
66. McCarthy, "Paul McCarthy: The Clown Speaks," 35.
67. Both *Pinocchio Pipenose Housedilemma* (1994) and *Santa Chocolate Shop* (1996–97), for example, require viewers to wear the costumes featured in the videos.
68. McCarthy, conversation with the author, August 16, 2010.
69. Smith, "Paul McCarthy," 49.
70. Paul McCarthy, "Performance Interruptus: Interview with Paul McCarthy," by Linda Burnham and Richard Newton, *High Performance* 1, no. 2 (June 1978): 9.
71. For a history of the Artists' Tower of Peace and the Artists Protest Committee, see Francis Frascina, *Art, Politics and Dissent: Aspects of the Art Left in Sixties America* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 15–47.

72. Ad Reinhardt, from an interview by Jeanne Seigel broadcast June 13, 1967, on WBAI, New York; reprinted in Frascina, *Art, Politics and Dissent*, 81–82.
73. Lippard used the term “new politicization” in her 1970 article “The Dilemma” (reprinted in *Get the Message? A Decade of Art for Social Change* [New York: E. P. Dutton, 1984], 6). By 1971–72, she later recalled, art activism largely seemed to be in retreat, increasingly co-opted by mainstream cultural institutions (Lucy Lippard, “Trojan Horses: Activist Art and Power,” in *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis [New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984], 350–51).
74. Smith, “Paul McCarthy,” 47.
75. Peter Clothier, “The Kipper Kids: An Endless Ritual,” *Journal: LAICA*, no. 5, April–May 1975, 48–49.
76. *Ibid.*, 49.
77. McCarthy, “Paul McCarthy: The Clown Speaks,” 37–38.
78. McCarthy, conversation with the author, August 16, 2010.
79. McCarthy, “Paul McCarthy: The Clown Speaks,” 37–38.
80. See, for example, Rugoff, “Mr. McCarthy’s Neighborhood,” 71.
81. McCarthy, interview with Stiles, 14.
82. Rugoff, “Mr. McCarthy’s Neighborhood,” 36, 33.
83. McCarthy, “Paul McCarthy: The Clown Speaks,” 31. McCarthy mentioned The Fugs in conversation with the author, August 16, 2010.
84. The festival took place from May to October 1980 and was organized by the Highland Art Agents (McCarthy, Barbara T. Smith, John Duncan, Chip Chapman, and Linda Frye Burnham). See Richard Hertz, “L.A. Flesh Art,” *High Performance 11/12* 3, nos. 3–4 (Fall/Winter 1980): 136.
85. Burnham, “Performance Art in Southern California,” 436n6.
86. Dennis Cooper, “Mike Kelley Talks with Dennis Cooper,” *Artforum International* 41, no. 4 (April 2003): 224.
87. Byron Coley, “Forever Expanding Internal Horizons” (1994), <http://www.cortical.org/spores/ByronColey.html> (accessed February 1, 2005).
88. Dean Suzuki, “LAFMS,” *Wired*, no. 5.04 (April 1997), reprinted at http://wired.com/wired/archive/5.04/music_reviews.html (accessed February 1, 2005).
89. Edwin Pouncey, review of ten-CD box set “Los Angeles Free Music Society: The Lowest Form of Music,” *The Wire*, reprinted at <http://www.cortical.org/pouncey.html> (accessed February 1, 2005).
90. David Keenan, “The Los Angeles Free Music Society,” *The Wire*, no. 320 (October 2010):44.
91. Chris Heenan, “Unruly and Legion,” *X-tra* 4, no. 1 (2000): 7.
92. Rick Potts, quoted in Keenan, “Los Angeles Free Music Society,” 40.
93. *Ibid.*
94. John Street, *Rebel Rock: The Politics of Popular Music* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 74.
95. Pouncey, review of “Lowest Form of Music.”
96. *Ibid.*
97. Rick Potts, quoted in Keenan, “Los Angeles Free Music Society,” 44.
98. McCarthy, conversation with the author, August 16, 2010.
99. In 1994 these songs were released as part of the ten-CD box set “Los Angeles Free Music Society: The Lowest Form of Music” (RRRecords, 1994). McCarthy has continued to perform and record with LAFMS musicians. The band Extended Organ, for example, was formed in 1997. It includes McCarthy, Joe Potts, Nilsen, Recchion, and occasionally included Mike Kelley. In 1999 they released an album, *XOXO* (Burbank, CA: Birdman Records, 1999).
100. Linda Burnham, “C.V. Massage,” *High Performance 11/12* 3, nos. 3–4 (Fall/Winter 1980): 137–40.
101. Rugoff, “Mr. McCarthy’s Neighborhood,” 33.
102. Rugoff also notes the emergence of this amateurism at this time (*ibid.*, 35).
103. McCarthy, “Paul McCarthy: The Clown Speaks,” 35.
104. *Ibid.*, 38.

CHAPTER TWO

1. Mike Kelley, conversation with the author, August 19, 2010.
2. Ibid.
3. Mike Kelley, "On Some Figurative Artists of the Late 1960s: Responses to Questions for *Eye Infection*," reprinted in Kelley, *Minor Histories: Statements, Conversations, Proposals*, ed. John C. Welchman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 166.
4. Kelley, conversation with the author, August 19, 2010. For information on Grimshaw, see <http://www.garygrimshaw.com/Biography.html> (accessed February 7, 2011).
5. Kelley, conversation with the author, August 19, 2010.
6. Ibid.
7. See Mary Jane Jacobs, "Kick Out the Jams: The Emergence of a Detroit Avant-Garde," in *Kick Out the Jam: Detroit's Cass Corridor 1963–1977*, exhibition catalogue (Detroit: Detroit Institute of Arts, 1980), 27–32.
8. Kelley, conversation with the author, August 19, 2010.
9. Ibid.
10. Mike Kelley, "Cross-Gender/Cross-Genre," in Kelley, *Foul Perfection: Essays and Criticism*, ed. John C. Welchman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 102.
11. The MC5—short for Motor City Five—was started in 1964 by Wayne Kramer and Fred Smith on 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 (Michael Cary, "The Rise and Fall of the MC5: Rock Music and Counterculture Politics in the Sixties" [PhD dissertation, Lehigh University, 1985], 47–49, 85).
12. John Sinclair, "Rock and Roll Is a Weapon of Cultural Revolution" (1968), reprinted in *Guitar Army: Street Writings/Prison Writings* (New York: Douglas Book, 1972), 113.
13. Cary, "Rise and Fall of the MC5," 145. In a 1970 *Village Voice* review, for example, Richard Goldstein praised the MC5 not for being revolutionary but for its 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* [Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970], 138).
14. David Marsh, "Mike Kelley and Detroit," in Elisabeth Sussman et al., *Mike Kelley: Catholic Tastes* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993), 40.
15. Kelley, "To the Throne of Chaos Where the Thin Flutes Pipe Mindlessly (Destroy All Monsters: 1974/77)": <http://www.mikekelley.com/DAMthrone.html> (accessed June 1, 2010).
16. Kelley, "Cross-Gender/Cross-Genre," 94.
17. Kelley, conversation with the author, August 19, 2010.
18. Kelley mentioned Kraftwerk in conversation with the author, August 19, 2010. He mentions Devo in "To the Throne of Chaos."
19. Kelley, "To the Throne of Chaos." For more on the Art Ensemble of Chicago, see George Lewis, *A Power Stronger than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008). For more on Sun Ra, see John F. Szwed, *Space Is the Place: The Life and Times of Sun Ra* (New York: Pantheon, 1997).
20. Kelley, "Some Aesthetic High Points," reprinted in *Minor Histories*, 42.
21. Kelley, conversation with the author, August 19, 2010.
22. Kelley, "Some Aesthetic High Points," 44.
23. Kelley, "Cross-Gender/Cross-Genre," 106–8.
24. Kelley, "Some Aesthetic High Points," 43.
25. Pouncey, review of "The Lowest Form of Music."
26. Kelley, "To the Throne of Chaos."
27. "Destroy All Monsters Interviews Itself," reprinted in Mike Kelley et al., *Destroy All Monsters: Geisha This* (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 1995), n.p.
28. Kelley, conversation with the author, August 19, 2010. Kelley mentions Reich in an interview by Carly Berwick, *Art in America* 97, no. 10 (November 2009): 173.

29. Nicole Rudick, "In God's Oasis," in *Return of the Repressed: Destroy All Monsters, 1973–1977*, ed. by Mike Kelley and Dan Nadel, exhibition catalogue (New York: Picture Box; Los Angeles: PRISM, 2011), 10.
30. Kelley, conversation with the author, August 19, 2010.
31. Rudick, "In God's Oasis," 9.
32. Kelley, conversation with the author, August 19, 2010.
33. Kelley, interview by Berwick, 173.
34. Luigi Russolo, "The Art of Noises" (1913), reprinted in *The Documents of 20th-Century Art: Futurist Manifestos*, ed. Umbro Apollonio (New York: Viking, 1973), 74–88.
35. Kelley, interview by Berwick, 174.
36. Mike Kelley, "Missing Time: Works on Paper, 1974–1995, Reconsidered" (1995), reprinted in José Lebrero Stals et al., *Mike Kelley 1985–1996* (Barcelona: Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 1997), 108.
37. Kelley has described the school as "one of those frumpy state university programs that never ventured beyond the influence of the New York School of painting" (Kelley, "David Askevold: The California Years," in *Foul Perfection*, 195).
38. Kelley, "Missing Time," 64.
39. *Ibid.*, 64–65.
40. Kelley, conversation with the author, August 19, 2010.
41. The first quote is from an exhibition catalogue for *The Thirteen Seasons [Heavy on the Winter]* (1995), reprinted in *Mike Kelley 1985–1996*, 101. The second quote is from an interview by John Miller in *Mike Kelley*, ed. William Bartman and Miyoshi Barosh (New York: Art Resources Transfer Press, 1992), 7.
42. Elizabeth Sussman, introduction to *Mike Kelley* (Whitman), 17.
43. Kelley, "Missing Time." 65. Kelley discusses the myth of the "rock god" in "To the Throne of Chaos."
44. Kelley, "Missing Time," 64–65.
45. Kelley, interview by John Miller, 11.
46. Kelley, conversation with the author, August 19, 2010.
47. Kelley, "On Some Figurative Artists of the Late 1960s," 170.
48. Kelley, conversation with the author, August 19, 2010.
49. *Ibid.*
50. *Ibid.*
51. 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> (accessed November 1, 2008). For a more comprehensive discussion of the Poetics and its context, see Branden W. Joseph, *Beyond the Dream Syndicate: Tony Conrad and the Arts after Cage* (A "Minor History") (New York: Zone Books, 2008), 14–20.
52. 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).
53. Kelley, "Introduction to an Essay."
54. *Ibid.*
55. Kelley, "Death and Transfiguration: A Letter from America," reprinted in *Foul Perfection*, 136.
56. Kelley, liner notes to *Destroy All Monsters* box set, *Destroy All Monsters*, n.p.
57. Kelley, "David Askevold," 195.
58. Kelley, "Shall We Kill Daddy?," reprinted in *Foul Perfection*, 185.
59. Kelley, conversation with the author, August 19, 2010.
60. Kelley, "Shall We Kill Daddy?," 184.
61. Kelley, "David Askevold," 195.
62. Kelley, "Shall We Kill Daddy?," 180.
63. *Ibid.*, 187.
64. *Ibid.*, 189.
65. Kelley, "David Askevold," 196.

66. Ibid., 195–96.
67. Ibid., 196. The four Askeveld works appeared in *Individuals: Post-Movement Art in America*, ed. by Alan Sondheim (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1977), 85–103.
68. Kelley, “David Askeveld,” 196–97.
69. John C. Welchman has identified Raymond Bayless’s *The Enigma of the Poltergeist* (West Nyack, NY: Parker, 1967) as one of Kelley’s sources (*Foul Perfection*, 256n2).
70. The complete text panel is reprinted in *Foul Perfection*, 254–56.
71. Richard Armstrong acknowledges making the connection between these sculptures and minimalism at the time (Richard Armstrong, “In the Beginning,” in *Mike Kelley (Whitney)*, 44).
72. Kelley, interview by Miller, 7.
73. Kelley, interview by Thomas Kellein, in *Mike Kelley, Thomas Kellein: A Conversation* (Ostfildern, Germany: Cantz Verlag, 1994), 19.
74. Kelley, interview by John Miller, 8.
75. Armstrong, “In the Beginning,” 51.
76. Kelley, conversation with the author, August 19, 2010.
77. Kelley, interview by Berwick, 174.
78. Armstrong, “In the Beginning,” 52.
79. Kelley, quoted in Sussman, introduction to *Mike Kelley (Whitney)*, 20.
80. Richard Armstrong, “Mike Kelley,” *Artforum International* 18, no. 3 (November 1979): 77.
81. For another contemporaneous example, see Howard Singerman, “Michael Kelley: ‘Reflections on a Can of Vernors,’ Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions,” *Artforum International* 20, no. 4 (December 1981): 78.
82. The descriptions of these performances derive from Tim Martin’s essay “Janitor in a Drum: Excerpts from a Performance History,” in *Mike Kelley (Whitney)*, 59–64.
83. Kelley, interview by Kellein, 17.
84. Martin, “Janitor in a Drum,” 69.
85. Ibid., 60.
86. Kelley, conversation with the author, August 19, 2010.
87. Kelley mentions each of the following artists in his interview by Miller, 9.
88. Kelley discusses this work with Smith in the 1986 “Mike Talks to Mike about ‘Mike,’” in *Mike Kelley: Interviews, Conversations, and Chit-Chat (1986–2004)*, ed. John C. Welchman (Zurich: JRP Ringier; Dijon: Les Presses du reel, 2005), 41–63.
89. Steven Stern, “Stuart Sherman,” *frieze*, no. 129 (March 2010): 139.
90. Kelley contributed an appreciation of de Cointet’s work in *Artforum International* 45, no. 10 (Summer 2007): 419.
91. Kelley, conversation with the author, August 19, 2010.
92. At the time, Kelley described his goal as “making rationality irrational”; quoted in Richard Hertz, “L.A. Flesh Art,” *High Performance* 11/12 3, nos. 3–4 (Fall/Winter 1980): 136.
93. Kelley, interview by Miller, 11–12.
94. Kathi Norklun, “Michael Kelley: The Flow of Belief; Can Art Replace Wrong-Headed Thinking?” *High Performance* 7, no. 2 (1984): 36–37.
95. Kelley, interview by Kellein, 17.
96. As Kelley recalls: “It was funny because afterwards people would sometimes come up to me and say, ‘I really agree with you, like with what you said about . . .’ And I would say, ‘But I said five things about . . .’ And they’d go, ‘Oh, I thought you said this . . .’ And it became immediately apparent that they had just projected whatever they wanted to onto the information because I gave it to them in a logical form” (interview by Miller, 11).
97. Ibid., 15.
98. Christopher Knight, “Mike Kelley Turns Confusion into Art” (1983), reprinted in *Mike Kelley*, ed. Thomas Kellein (Stuttgart: Edition Cantz, 1992), 18.
99. Kelley, interview by Miller, 15–16.
100. Howard Singerman, “Mike Kelley’s Line,” in *Three Projects: Half a Man, From My Institution to Yours, Pay for Your Pleasure* (Chicago: Renaissance Center at the University of Chicago, 1988), 13.

101. Kelley, interview by Miller, 36.
102. Benjamin De Mott, "The 60s: A Cultural Revolution" (1969), reprinted in *The Cult of Youth in Middle-Class America*, ed. Richard L. Rapson (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1971), 105.
103. <http://www.postalmuseum.si.edu/artofthestamp/index.html> (accessed November 1, 2008).
104. Mike Kelley, *Plato's Cave, Rothko's Chapel, Lincoln's Profile* (Venice, CA: New City Editions, with Artists Space, NY, 1986), 85.
105. John Miller, "The Mortification of the Sign: Mike Kelley's Felt Banners," in *Three Projects*, 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 opposite effect—as a clichéd and antiquated substance, deceptively invested with emotional weight.
106. Kelley, "Three Projects: *Half a Man, From My Institution to Yours, Pay for Your Pleasure*," reprinted in *Minor Histories*, 14.
107. Kelley, interview by Miller, 16.

CHAPTER THREE

1. Thomas Crow, "The Art of the Fugitive in 1970s Los Angeles: Runaway Self-Consciousness," in *Under the Big Black Sun: California Art 1974–1981*, ed. Lisa Gabrielle Mark and Paul Schimmel, exhibition catalogue (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Munich: DelMonico Books/Prestel, 2011) 59.
2. Raymond Pettibon, conversation with the author, August 19, 2010.
3. Ibid.
4. Raymond Pettibon, interview by Ryan Adams, *BlackBook*, May 6, 2009: <http://www.blackbookmag.com/article/ryan-adams-the-raw-power-of-raymond-pettibon/7336> (accessed July 12, 2010).
5. Pettibon, conversation with the author, August 19, 2010.
6. Raymond Pettibon, "Dreams Not Sprung from the Bush of Madonna," interview by Byron Coley (1988), reprinted in *Raymond Pettibon* (Phaidon), 102.
7. Pettibon, conversation with the author, August 19, 2010.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Pettibon, interview by Steven Cerio, *Seconds* magazine, reprint, <http://stevenцерio.com/2015/26/interview-with-raymond-pettibon/> (accessed 12/07/2010).
11. Pettibon, conversation with the author, August 19, 2010.
12. Ibid.
13. Pettibon, interview by Cerio.
14. See Pettibon, "A Conversation with Raymond Pettibon," interview by Jim Lewis, *Parkett* 47 (Summer 1996): 58; Pettibon, interview by Cerio.
15. Pettibon, conversation with the author, 08/19/2010.
16. Pettibon, interview by Lewis, 58.
17. Ibid.
18. Pettibon, conversation with the author, August 19, 2010.
19. Pettibon, interview by Cerio.
20. Steven Blush, *American Hardcore: A Tribal History*, ed. George Petros (Los Angeles: Feral House, 2001), 52.
21. Crow, "Art of the Fugitive in 1970s Los Angeles," 58.
22. 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 Dave Lang, "The SST Records Story" (1998), <http://www.furious.com/perfect/sst1.html> (accessed June 1, 2010).
23. Michael Azerrad, *Our Band Could Be Your Life: Scenes from the American Indie Underground, 1981–1991* (New York: Little, Brown, 2001), 51.

24. In 1977, for example, *Slash* magazine reporter Claude Bessy (aka Kickboy Face), one of the LA music scene's leading commentators, noted the significance of the then-recent US invasion by 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 et al. [Santa Monica, CA: Smart Art, 1999], 6). Looking back on the era, protopunk musician Richard Hell explains that "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. . . . 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). John Street points out the actual traditionalism of punk (*Rebel Rock: The Politics of Popular Music* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1986], 85).

25. Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the 20th Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 56.

26. Simon Frith, "Formalism, Realism and Leisure: The Case of Punk" (1980), reprinted in *The Subcultures Reader*, ed. Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton (London: Routledge, 1997), 167–68.

27. *Ibid.*, 166–68.

28. Joe Carducci, quoted in Blush, *American Hardcore*, 75.

29. Blush, *American Hardcore*, 12, 54.

30. *Ibid.*, 275.

31. Barney Hoskyns, *Waiting for the Sun: The Story of the Los Angeles Music Scene* (London: Viking, 1996), 303.

32. Pettibon, conversation with the author, August 19, 2010.

33. Pettibon, interview by Grady Turner, *BOMB* 69 (Fall 1999), reprint, <http://bombsite.com/issues/69/articles/2257> (accessed March 22, 2010).

34. Pettibon, conversation with the author, August 19, 2010.

35. *Ibid.*

36. Street, *Rebel Rock*, 211.

37. David A. Ensminger, *Visual Vitriol: The Street Art and Subcultures of the Punk and Hardcore Generation* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 25.

38. Relegated to virtual obscurity by the end of the 1960s, the MC5 had a resurgence in the late 70s and early 80s. Labeled "proto-punk" at this time, the band's first two albums were rereleased in the United Kingdom in 1977, and in 1982, *Kick Out the Jams* was rereleased in the United States (Michael Cary, "The Rise and Fall of the MC5: Rock Music and Counterculture Politics in the Sixties" [PhD dissertation, Lehigh University, 1985], 126).

39. Sinclair, preface, *Guitar Army*, 34.

40. Chris Morris, "LA Punk," in *Forming*, ed. Cervenka et al., 22.

41. R. Seth Friedman, *The Factsheet Five Zine Reader: Dispatches from the Edge of the Zine Revolution* (New York: Three Rivers, 1997), 9–10.

42. For an engaging overview and analysis of punk visual culture, see Ensminger, *Visual Vitriol*.

43. Hal Negro, in "So This is War, Eh? *Slash* Magazine, *Flipside*, *Lobotomy*, and the LA Punk Zines (1977)," in *We Got the Neutron Bomb: The Untold Story of LA Punk*, ed. Marc Spitz and Brendan Mullen (New York: Three Rivers, 2001), 83.

44. "Granny's Rips off Punks," *Flip Side Magazine*, no. 1 (1977): 4.

45. *Flip Side Magazine*, no. 16 (October 1979): n.p.

46. Greg Ginn, in interview with Black Flag, *Flipside*, no. 22 (December 1980): n.p.

47. *Journal* was published by the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art and later became *Journal: Southern California Art Magazine*. It ran from 1974 to 1987. *High Performance* was published by Astro Artz from 1978 to 1997. *The Dumb Ox* was published by James Hugunin and Theron Kelley from 1976 to 1980.

48. See, for example, Linda Frye Burnham's review (mentioned in chapter 1) of the McCarthy/LAFMS band C.V. Massacre (Linda Burnham, "C.V. Massacre," *High Performance* 11/12 3, nos. 3–4 [Fall/Winter 1980]: 137–40).
49. Kickboy Face, "Teen Genius," *Journal: L.A.I.C.A.*, no. 19 (June–July 1978): 11.
50. Pettibon, quoted in Peter Margasak, "Art Is Not a Four-Letter Word . . . But Punk Is," *Chicago Reader* (September 10, 1998), <http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/art-is-not-a-four-letter-word/Content?oid=897233> (accessed July 14, 2010).
51. Liner notes to Destroy All Monsters box set, *Destroy All Monsters*, n.p.
52. Ensminger, *Visual Vitriol*, 25.
53. Pettibon, interview by Turner.
54. Pettibon, conversation with the author, August 19, 2010.
55. "Dusted hippies connecting with Hell's Angels" refers to the infamous 1969 concert held at the Altamont Speedway outside San Francisco.
56. Robert Storr, "'You Are What You Read': Words and Pictures by Raymond Pettibon," in Storr et al., *Raymond Pettibon* (London: Phaidon, 2001), 34–35.
57. Bob Dylan, "The Times They Are A-Changin,'" on *The Times They Are A-Changin'* (Columbia Records, 1964).
58. Storr, "You Are What You Read," 43.
59. 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: Entwistle Books, 1980).
60. Called "Record Labeling, Senate Hearing 99–259," these hearings were held in September 1985. For an overview of these hearings, see Deena Weinstein, *Heavy Metal: The Music and Its Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 2000), 249–63.
61. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 73–77.
62. For a discussion of Manson's interpretations of "Helter Skelter" and other Beatles songs, see Vincent Bugliosi with Curt Gentry, *Helter Skelter: The True Story of the Manson Murders* (New York: Bantam Books, 1974), 321–31.
63. See, for example, Michael André Bernstein, *Bitter Carnival: "Ressentiment" and the Abject Hero* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).
64. *B and W* ran from June to July, 1985.
65. Both artists confirmed this in conversation with the author.
66. Raymond Pettibon, "A Conversation with Raymond Pettibon," interview by Michelle Plochere, *Artweek*, February 6, 1992, 20.
67. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Raymond Pettibon: After Laughter," *October* 129 (Summer 2009): 34–35.
68. Kelley, conversation with the author, August 19, 2010.
69. Pettibon, interview by Lewis, 58.
70. Buchloh, "Raymond Pettibon: After Laughter," 24, 26.
71. This drawing is part of a multifaceted series titled *Plato's Cave, Rothko's Chapel, Lincoln's Profile*. Kelley describes the sources of the Deposition and the quotation in an interview by Robert Storr, *Art in America* 82, no. 6 (June 1994): 93.
72. Pettibon, conversation with the author, August 19, 2010.

CHAPTER FOUR

1. Likewise, Kelley's transference of the conjoined afghans from their usual horizontal position to a vertical one mimics Pollock's shift of his canvases from floor to wall.
2. Art historian Michael Leja notes, for example, that abstract expressionism "has been recognized, from its first accounts, as a male domain, ruled by a familiar social construction of 'masculine' as tough, aggressive, sweeping, bold" (Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993], 256).
3. William Feaver, "The Kid from Cody," exh. rev. of *Jackson Pollock: Drawing into Painting* (Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, 1979), quoted in Anna Chave, "Pollock and Krasner: Script and

Postscript" (1993), in *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, 2nd ed., ed. Francis Frascina (London: Routledge, 2000), 332.

4. June Wayne, "The Male Artist as a Stereotypical Female," *Art Journal* 32, no. 4 (Summer 1973): 414–16. This model has deep roots in Western culture, as shown, for example, by Mary D. Sheriff in her examination of eighteenth-century French art and gender politics: Mary D. Sheriff, *Moved by Love: Inspired Artists and Deviant Women in Eighteenth-Century France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

5. As Ann Gibson explains, this macho image was especially crucial to Pollock and his cohorts, who had to overcome the American perception of art as a feminine endeavor (Ann E. Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997], 11).

6. Mira Schor, "Backlash and Appropriation," in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 251.

7. Faith Wilding, "Monstrous Domesticity" (1995), rep. *M/E/A/N/I/N/G: An Anthology of Artists' Writings, Theory and Criticism*, ed. Susan Bee and Mira Schor (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 93–94.

8. Erika Doss, "Not Just a Guy's Club Anymore," *American Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (1998): 840.

9. For an analysis of the myth of Reagan as archetype of male power, see James Combs, *The Reagan Range: The Nostalgia Myth in American Politics* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1993), 48–56.

10. Ralph Rugoff briefly mentions gender confusion in relation to McCarthy's early performances (Rugoff, "Mr. McCarthy's Neighborhood," in Rugoff, Kristine Stiles, and Giacinto Di Pietrantonio, *Paul McCarthy* [London: Phaidon, 1996], 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). 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, noting 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, introduction to *Mike Kelley: Catholic Tastes* [New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993], 27), yet none of the catalogue's thirteen essays deals with the subject. For a more thorough prior discussion of Kelley's engagement with gender, see my article "Manly Crafts: Mike Kelley's (Oxy)Moronic Gender Bending," *Art Journal* 69, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 74–91. Questions of gender in Pettibon's work have not previously been examined substantially.

11. Sandra Harding, "Can Men Be Subjects of Feminist Thought?" in *Men Doing Feminism*, ed. Tom Digby (New York: Routledge, 1998), 179.

12. In the former category, see Alice Jardine and Paul Smith, eds., *Men in Feminism* (New York: Methuen, 1987); Joseph A. Boone and Michael Cadden, eds., *Engendering Men: The Question of Male Feminist Criticism* (New York: Routledge, 1990); and Digby, ed., *Men Doing Feminism*. In the latter category, see Harry Brod, ed., *The Making of Masculinities: The New Men's Studies* (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1987); David D. Gilmore, *Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990); and Maurice Berger, Brian Wallis, and Simon Watson, eds., *Constructing Masculinity* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

13. 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*, ed. Digby, 41.

14. In "Men in Feminism: Men and Feminist Theory" (1987), for example, Paul Smith argues that men must determine how best to uphold feminism without committing the errors it teaches them to avoid. Worrying that progressive men might not be able to avoid offending feminists, he calls for progressive-minded men to be "properly correct" (Smith, "Men in Feminism: Men and Feminist Theory," in *Men in Feminism*, ed. Jardine and Smith, 38).

15. This reactionary agenda was also reflected in American popular culture of the time. As

Linda S. Kauffman points out, 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 when 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” (Linda S. Kauffman, *Bad Girls and Sick Boys: Fantasies in Contemporary Art and Culture* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998], 118–19).

16. David J. Kahane, “Male Feminism as Oxymoron,” in *Men Doing Feminism*, ed. Jardine and Smith, 213–35.

17. See Burnham, “Performance Art in Southern California,” 390–438.

18. For *Capacity Crowd* (1978), Newton dropped fifty-six thousand baseball cards into Dodger Stadium during a game. His *Glancing Blow* (1979) was an “automobile performance” staged on the streets of Los Angeles.

19. Linda Frye Burnham, “Performance Art in Southern California: An Overview” (1980), in *Performance Anthology: Source Book for a Decade of California Performance Art*, ed. Carl E. Loeffler and Darlene Tong (San Francisco: Contemporary Arts, 1980), 413–16.

20. McCarthy’s method in *Experimental Dancer—Rumpus Room* is similar to that employed by Vito Acconci in his 1971 Super-8 film *Conversions, Part II (Insistence, Adaptation, Groundwork, Display)*, a work with which McCarthy was familiar at the time (McCarthy, conversation with the author, August 16, 2010). 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 . . .)” (Vito Acconci: *Writings, Works, Projects*, ed. Gloria Moure [Barcelona: Ediciones Polígrafa, 2001], 118).

21. As Lucy Lippard has pointed out, women artists of the 1950s and 60s “feared the adjective feminine.” Lucy Lippard, “1975: Excerpts from the Catalogues of Three Women’s Exhibitions” (1975), reprinted in Lippard, *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women’s Art* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1976), 50. “‘Female techniques’ like sewing, weaving, knitting, ceramics, even the use of pastel colors (pink!) and delicate lines” were therefore fervently avoided, even considered taboo (Lippard, “Household Images in Art” [1973], reprinted in *From the Center*, 57).

22. One of the FAP’s most prominent manifestations was the landmark 1971 collaboration *Womanhouse*, an abandoned Hollywood mansion transformed into a set of female-oriented environments. For a good synopsis of the Feminist Art Program, *Womanhouse*, and their context, see Faith Wilding, *By Our Own Hands: The Woman Artist’s Movement, Southern California, 1970–1976* (Santa Monica, CA: Double X, 1977). In the words of Judy Chicago and Miriam 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” (Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, from the introduction to the *Womanhouse* catalogue, quoted in Wilding, *By Our Own Hands*, 25–26).

23. Arlene Raven, “*Womanhouse*,” in *Power of Feminist Art*, ed. Broude and Garrard, 60.

24. Paul McCarthy, “There’s a Big Difference Between Ketchup and Blood,” interview by Marc Selwyn, reprinted in Rugoff, Stiles, and Di Pietrantonio, *Paul McCarthy* (Phaidon), 136.

25. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 6.

26. Judith Butler, “Melancholy Gender/Refused Identification,” in *Constructing Masculinity*, ed. Berger, Wallis, and Watson, 32.

27. See Elaine Showalter, “Critical Cross-Dressing: Male Feminists and the Woman of the Year” (1983), in *Men in Feminism*, ed. Jardine and Smith.

28. *Ibid.*, 123.

29. See Annette Kuhn, *The Power of the Images: Essays on Representation and Sexuality* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), 73.

30. Mira Schor, “Representations of the Penis,” reprinted in Schor, *Wet: On Painting, Feminism, and Art Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 1997), 23.

31. Tania Modleski, *Feminism without Women: Culture and Criticism in a "Postfeminist" Age* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 7.
32. Uncle Miltie was the nickname given to Milton Berle, television host of *Texaco Star Theater* (1948–56). Cross-dressing was a central technique in Berle's comedy. Examples of cross-dressing in American popular culture at the time of tootsie include the films *Cloud 9* (1979), *The World According to Garp* (1982), and *La Cage aux Folles* (1983); the heavy-metal bands Mötley Crüe and Poison; and the television show *Bosom Buddies*.
33. Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Male Trouble," in *Constructing Masculinity*, ed. Berger, Wallis, and Watson, 73–74.
34. *Ibid.*, 70. Thus Solomon-Godeau identifies the coexistence of the rugged Marlboro Man on the one hand and an abundance of advertisements featuring seductive, passive young men on the other (e.g., the "languorous Versace boy" 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'rnt Strokes*. Indeed, as James Combs points out, the Rambo character reflected the conservative context of America in the 1980s: "Rambo was . . . 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, *Reagan Range*, 54).
35. Jones, "Paul McCarthy's Inside Out Body," 125.
36. Rugoff, "Mr. McCarthy's Neighborhood," 35.
37. Jones, "Paul McCarthy's Inside Out Body," 128.
38. Paul Smith, "Eastwood Bound" (1993), in *Constructing Masculinity*, ed. Berger, Wallis, and Watson, 77–97.
39. Smith, "Paul McCarthy," 49.
40. Paul McCarthy, quoted in Rachel Harrison, "California Über Alles," *Artforum International* 44, no. 1 (September 2005): 70.
41. Kelley himself acknowledges this in "Cross-Gender/Cross Genre," in Kelley, *Foul Perfection: Essays and Criticism*, ed. John C. Welchman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 111.
42. See Lauraine Leblanc, *Pretty in Punk: Girls' Gender Resistance in a Boys' Subculture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002).
43. Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1979), 89.
44. Angela McRobbie, "Second Hand Dresses and the Role of the Ragmarket," in *The Subcultures Reader*, ed. Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton (London: Routledge, 1997), 198.
45. Steven Blush, *American Hardcore: A Tribal History*, ed. George Petros (Los Angeles: Feral House, 2001), 35.
46. Lee Ving, quoted in Blush, *American Hardcore*, 22.
47. Mike Ness, quoted in Blush, *American Hardcore*, 18.
48. As Ness explains, "Where we lived in Southern California, if you walked down the street with a leather jacket and dyed red hair, you were making a decision to get into some sort of confrontation. We were 17 and 18 and there was a generation of 25-year-old Hippies that didn't want this to happen. There were also angry parents, construction workers; they'd drive by and yet 'Faggot!'—we'd flip 'em off and they'd turn around and come back and we'd fight" (quoted in Blush, *American Hardcore*, 25).
49. Blush, *American Hardcore*, 34.
50. 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" (Richard Reynolds, *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology* [Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1992], 77).
51. 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" (quoted in Dennis Dooley, "The Man of Tomorrow

and the Boys of Yesterday,” in *Superman at Fifty! The Persistence of a Legend*, ed. Dooley and Gary Engle [Cleveland: Octavia, 1987], 26). The issue of superheroines, such as Wonder Woman, is beyond the scope of this study. However, as Reynolds points out, these characters wholly conform to the male-oriented comic world (Reynolds, *Super Heroes*, 34).

52. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “Raymond Pettibon: After Laughter,” *October*, no. 129 (Summer 2009): 23.

53. The first gay superhero, Northstar, did not emerge until 1992 and was specifically created to deal with the growing problem of AIDS (Reynolds, *Super Heroes*, 81).

54. Umberto Eco, “The Myth of Superman,” in *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), 115.

55. Reynolds, *Super Heroes*, 68, 81. This despite the fact—or maybe because of the fact—that such comic books are marketed exclusively to boys (Roger Sabin, *Comics, Comix and Graphic Novels: A History of Comic Art* [London: Phaidon, 1996], 44).

56. Richard Dyer, “Getting over the Rainbow: Identity and Pleasure in Gay Cultural Politics,” in *Only Entertainment* (London: Routledge, 1992), 159–72.

57. Reynolds, *Super Heroes*, 68.

58. *Ibid.*, 81.

59. Pettibon has acknowledged that his superhero reconfigurations are a way to critique American values (see Dennis Cooper, in conversation with Raymond Pettibon, in Robert Storr et al., *Raymond Pettibon* [London: Phaidon, 2001], 25).

60. Sylvester Stallone’s *First Blood* movies, 1980s professional wrestling, and television shows such as *Miami Vice* are three of the many possible examples of this cartoonish masculinity, not to mention the return of the Caped Crusader himself in the 1989 movie *Batman*.

61. See, for examples, Leja’s *Reframing Abstract Expressionism* and Gibson’s *Abstract Expressionism*. Both authors critique the overgendering of action painting and revise canonical readings by identifying both “masculine” and “feminine” qualities in Pollock’s paintings.

62. For a discussion of the latter three examples, see Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 94–100.

63. *Ibid.*, 96–97; and 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.

64. Kelley, conversation with the author, August 19, 2010.

65. Kelley, interview by John Miller, in Mike Kelley, ed. William Bartman and Miyoshi Barosh (New York: Art Resources Transfer Press, 1992), 54.

66. Kelley, interviewed by Thomas Kellein, in Mike Kelley, *Thomas Kellein: A Conversation* (Ostfildern, Germany: Cantz Verlag, 1994), 5.

67. Richard Meyer, “Hard Targets: Male Bodies, Feminist Art, and the Forces of Censorship in the 1970s,” in *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, ed. Lisa Gabrielle Mark (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 368–74.

68. Kelley himself acknowledges this effect in 1989, the same year as his *Manly Crafts* series, citing Oldenburg’s softened objects as an example of a male artist using “feminine” qualities “to attack and destabilize rigid patriarchal order” (Kelley, “Foul Perfection,” in *Foul Perfection*, 32).

69. Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, “Female Imagery” (1973), reprinted in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (New York: Routledge, 2003), 40–43.

70. Kelley, conversation with the author, August 19, 2010.

71. Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul and Pantheon Books, 1981), 130.

72. Judith Barry and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, “Textual Strategies: The Politics of Art Making” (1980), reprinted in *Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Jones, 53–56.

73. Kelley has acknowledged this response and his own frustration with it. See, for instance, “Architectural Non-memory Replaced with Psychic Reality,” in Mike Kelley, *Minor Histories: Statements, Conversations, Proposals*, ed. John C. Welchman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 320.

74. Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), 43.
75. 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, 1992), 264, 270–72.
76. 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," in *Grids*, [Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1972], reprinted in *From the Center*, 64–65). Lippard's comments reveal 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.
77. According to Carl Andre, for example, he attempted 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" (quoted in Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," 268).
78. Kelley, "Death and Transfiguration: A Letter from America," reprinted in *Foul Perfection*, 145–46.
79. Kelley, interview by Miller, 44.
80. Kelley, "Foul Perfection," 32. Robert Morris's felt works from the late 1960s and early 1970s can be couched in similar terms. Like Kelley, Morris operates against the hard geometry of minimalism, emphasizing physical, psychological and cultural effects of soft, droopy materials. Indeed, his works have been characterized as "feminine," both at the time of their production (see, for example, Grace Glueck, "A Feeling for the Felt," *New York Times*, April 28, 1968, 28) and in more recent analyses (see, for example, Jones, "Transgressive Femininity," 43).
81. Kelley, "Cross-Gender/Cross-Genre," 104.
82. See Butler, *Gender Trouble*, viii.
83. *Documenta 9*—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.
84. Nancy Princenthal, "Mike Kelley at Metro Pictures," *Art in America* 81, no. 4 (April 1993): 127.
85. Kelley, interview by Kellein, 5.
86. Kelley, conversation with the author, August 19, 2010.
87. Jan Avgikos, "Mike Kelley, Metro Pictures," *Artforum International* 31, no. 7 (March 1993): 93.
88. *Ibid.*

CHAPTER FIVE

1. "Shang-A-Lang" appears on the Bay City Rollers' album *Rollin'* (Bell Records, 1974).
2. The 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)—intended to help Americans overcome their inhibitions, ostensibly ushering them into the age of free love. William Masters and Virginia Johnson's pseudoscientific study *Human Sexual Inadequacy* (1970) also became a cultural phenomenon at this time, offering supposed solutions to a range of sexual problems, including impotence and "inorgasmia." These guidebooks coincided with a plethora of sexually graphic popular culture: 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).
3. David Allyn, *Make Love, Not War: The Sexual Revolution, an Unfettered History* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2000), 176, 229.
4. Bob Greene, "Beyond the Sexual Revolution," *Newsweek*, September 29, 1975, 13.
5. America's industry of commercialized sexuality was fueled by a series of Supreme Court

rulings against censorship. As historian Jeffery Escoffier explains, “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” (Jeffrey Escoffier, introduction to *Sexual Revolution*, ed. Escoffier [New York: Thunder’s Mouth, 2003], xxiv–v).

6. John H. Gagnon and William Simon, *Sexual Conduct: The Social Sources of Human Sexuality* (Chicago: Aldine, 1973), 2–5.

7. *Ibid.*, 8–15. 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 overemphasis on those processes, a determinism not applied to other, nonsexual forms of human behavior.

8. *Ibid.*, 17.

9. Hugh Hefner, quoted in “Think Clean,” *Time*, March 3, 1967, reprinted in Allyn, *Sexual Revolution*, 366–79. *Playboy* began in 1953 with a press run of seventy thousand and by 1967 had a circulation of four million readers.

10. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).

11. *Ibid.*, 159.

12. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today’s Students* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 99–108.

13. “Sex panics” is a term used by Lisa Duggan in her introduction to *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture*, ed. Duggan and Nan D. Hunter (New York: Routledge, 1995).

14. Gayle S. Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality” reprinted in *American Feminist Thought at Century’s End: A Reader*, ed. Linda S. Kauffman (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1993), 13–16.

15. *Ibid.*, 9.

16. Sharon Thompson, “Feminism and Teen Romance: 1966–1983,” in *The 60s without Apology*, ed. Sonhya Sayres, Anders Stephanson, Stanley Aronowitz, and Fredric Jameson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 297–99.

17. Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse* (New York: Free Press, 1987).

18. Leo Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?” (1987), reprinted in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis Cultural Activism*, ed. Douglas Crimp (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 197–222.

19. Jeffrey Weeks, “Values in an Age of Uncertainty,” reprinted in *Discourses of Sexuality: From Aristotle to AIDS*, ed. Donna C. Stanton (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 405.

20. The term “sex hierarchy” is Rubin’s (Rubin, “Thinking Sex,” 14–16). See also Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality and Its Discontents: Meaning, Myth and Modern Sexualities* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985).

21. Weeks, for example, argued that sexual pluralism could lead to “a freer, unalienated sexual world,” opening up possibilities for “the end of sexual domination and subordination, for new sexual and social relations, for new, and genuine opportunities for pleasure and choice” (*ibid.*, 260).

22. *Ibid.*, ix.

23. Donna C. Stanton, “Introduction: The Subject of Sexuality,” in *Discourses of Sexuality*, ed. Stanton, 1.

24. Eva Meyer-Hermann, “Sailor’s Meat,” in *Paul McCarthy: Brain Box Dream Box*, ed. Meyer-Hermann (Eindhoven, Netherlands: Van Abbemuseum, 2004), 70.

25. Schneemann deliberately positioned the audience as close to the stage as possible, which she saw as having “heightened the sense of community, transgressing the polarity between performer and audience” (Carolee Schneemann, “Meat Joy,” in *Imagining Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003], 61).

26. Amelia Jones, “Survey,” in *The Artist’s Body*, ed. Tracey Warr (London: Phaidon, 2000), 27. Marcuse ultimately backtracked from his original position, revealing misgivings regarding sexual liberation in the United States, which he increasingly saw as unlikely. In *One-Di-*

mensional 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, introduction to *Sexual Revolution*, xxxiii).

27. McCarthy claims to have been unaware of Schneemann's work at the time (Paul McCarthy, "There's a Big Difference between Ketchup and Blood," interview by Marc Selwyn, reprinted in Ralph Rugoff, Kristine Stiles, and Giacinto Di Pietrantonio, *Paul McCarthy* [London: Phaidon, 1996], 134).

28. Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975).

29. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966).

30. Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, *Creativity and Perversion* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984), 2.

31. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

32. Georges Bataille, "Sacrificial Mutilation and the Severed Ear of Vincent Van Gogh," in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927–1939* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 70.

33. John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 328–29.

34. Alan Warde, *Consumption, Food and Taste: Culinary Antinomies and Commodity Culture* (London: Sage, 1997), 90.

35. D'Emilio and Friedman, *Intimate Matters*, 358.

36. McCarthy has consistently pointed out the sociological significance of his materials and its centrality to his work. See, for example, his interview with Kristine Stiles in *Paul McCarthy* (Phaidon), 7–29.

37. Jeremy Iggers, *The Garden of Eating: Food, Sex and the Hunger for Meaning* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 23–24.

38. *Ibid.*, 183.

39. Alex Comfort, *The Joy of Sex: A Cordon Bleu Guide to Lovemaking* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972).

40. Warde, *Consumption, Food and Taste*, 92.

41. *Ibid.*, 13.

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

43. Andreas Huyssen, "The Cultural Politics of Pop," in Paul Taylor, *Post-Pop Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 46–47.

44. George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society: An Investigation into the Changing Character of Contemporary Social Life* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge, 1995).

45. Zygmunt Bauman, "Industrialism, Consumerism, Power" (1983), reprinted in *The Consumption Reader*, ed. David B. Clarke, Marcus A. Doel, and Kate M. L. Housiaux (London: Routledge, 2003), 58–59.

46. *Ibid.*, 60.

47. Carole M. Counihan, *The Anthropology of Food and Body: Gender, Meaning, and Power* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 119.

48. Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 157.

49. *Ibid.*, 35.

50. Gagnon and Simon, *Sexual Conduct*, 22–23.

51. "By 1970," notes Walter Kendrick, "'hard-core' pornography had grown from . . . secretive, underworld stuff . . . into the subject of scores of books and almost daily articles in the popular press" (Walter Kendrick, *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture* [New York: Viking Penguin, 1987], 208).

52. An abridged version of the report can be found in *The American Sexual Dilemma*, ed. William L. O'Neill (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), 103–6. It concluded that "empirical research designed to clarify the question has found no evidence to date that exposure

- to explicit sexual materials plays a significant role in the causation of delinquent or criminal behavior among youths or adults.”
53. Richard Nixon, quoted in Kendrick, *Secret Museum*, 219.
 54. Susan Sontag, “The Pornographic Imagination” (1967), reprinted in *Sexual Revolution*, ed. Jeffery Escoffier (New York: Thunder’s Mouth, 2003), 402.
 55. Richard Nixon, quoted in Kendrick, *Secret Museum*, 219.
 56. MacKinnon and Dworkin essentially revived Brownmiller’s 1975 assertion that “pornography, like rape, is a male invention, designed to dehumanize women, to reduce the female to an object of sexual access” (Brownmiller, *Against Our Will*, 394).
 57. As Walter Kendrick points out, 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 concludes, “inseparable and deeply implicated in one another” (Kendrick, *Secret Museum*, 157).
 58. Lucy Lippard, *A Different War: Vietnam in Art*, exhibition catalogue, Whatcom Museum of History and Art (Seattle: Real Comet, 1990), 17.
 59. Barbara Smith, “Paul McCarthy,” *Journal: Southern California Art Magazine* 21 (January-February 1979): 49.
 60. For complete descriptions of these works, see Acconci, Vito Acconci: *Writings, Works, Projects*, ed. Gloria Moure (Barcelona: Ediciones Polígrafa, 2001).
 61. Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?,” 215.
 62. Bersani recognizes this, pointing out that the social constructionists see sex as having been contaminated by power relations, as if it could “somehow be conceived of apart from all relations of power” (ibid., 220).
 63. Steven Marcus, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England* (New York: Basic Books, 1966), 268.
 64. Ibid., 285.
 65. Ibid., 209.
 66. Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Edred (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 264–65.
 67. Ibid., 31.
 68. Mike Kelley, “Fresh Acconci,” in Kelley, *Minor Histories: Statements, Conversations, Proposals*, ed. John C. Welchman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 220.
 69. Kelley, “Black Nostalgia,” interview by 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.
 70. Ibid., 52.
 71. Kelley, “Sublevel: Dim Recollection Illuminated by Multicolored Swamp Gas,” in *Mike Kelley—Two Projects*, 13.
 72. Kelley, “Sublevel,” 13; Kelley, “Black Nostalgia,” 52.
 73. Kelley, “Black Nostalgia,” 52.
 74. Mike Kelley, “Foul Perfection,” in Kelley, *Foul Perfection: Essays and Criticism*, ed. John C. Welchman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 23–26.
 75. Kelley, conversation with the author, August 19, 2010.
 76. Kelley, “Dirty Toys: Mike Kelley Interviewed,” interview by Ralph Rugoff (1991), reprinted in *Mike Kelley*, ed. Thomas Kellein (Basel: Edition Cantz, 1992), 89.
 77. Ibid., 234.
 78. Carolyn J. Dean, *Sexuality and Modern Western Culture* (New York: Twayne, 1996), 84.
 79. The interview took place at San Quentin Prison and aired on *CBS News Nightwatch* on March 7, 1986. Rose won the national news Emmy Award for best interview in 1987.
 80. Michael André Bernstein, *Bitter Carnival: “Ressentiment” and the Abject Hero* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 182.
 81. Though Bernstein sees his book as a polemic, he hedges his argument at the very end

by acknowledging the fact that both positions are indeed problematic. He is unable, he admits, “to side exclusively with the voices of conformity” (ibid.).

82. Weeks, *Sexuality and Its Discontents*, 17

83. Wilhelm Reich, *The Sexual Revolution: Toward a Self-Governing Character Structure* (New York: Orgone Institute Press, 1945), originally published in German as *Der Sexuelle Kampf der Jugend* (Berlin: Verlag für Sexualpolitik, 1932). 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” (Reich, *Sexual Revolution*, reprinted in *Sexual Revolution*, ed. Escoffier, 578–87). The term sexual revolution, though coined by Reich, first surfaced in America as a pejorative, as in Harvard sociologist Pitrim Sorokin’s *The American Sex Revolution*, in which the author lamented the apparent eroticization of mass culture, understood as an unambiguous sign of moral decay (Pitrim Sorokin, *The American Sex Revolution* [Boston: F. Porter Sargent, 1956], 54). However, it was the Reichian sense of the term that was popularized in the 1960s.

84. For a thorough history of the Orgone Accumulator and Reich’s influence on American culture, see Christopher Turner, *Adventures in the Orgasmatron: How the Sexual Revolution Came to America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011).

85. Ibid., 5. In 1954 Reich was charged by the FDA with violating the Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act due to his increasingly outlandish and misleading claims. 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.

86. Ibid., 360–61, 434.

87. In his 1984 essay “From Reich to Marcuse,” for example, Joel Kovel recalls the excitement Reich’s theories produced in the 1960s yet recognizes that the counterculture’s embrace of Reich was “shallow, romantic, and potentially reactionary” (in *Sixties without Apology*, ed. Sayres et al., 258).

88. Kelley, “What Makes the Worm Growl,” interview by Dave Shulman, *LA Weekly*, January 22–28, 1999, <http://www.laweekly.com/ink/printme.php?eid=3616> (accessed November 20, 2008).

89. Kelley, “A Stopgap Measure,” poster produced for exhibition at Patrick Painter Gallery, Los Angeles, 1999, reprinted in *Mike Kelley* (Phaidon), 142.

90. Shep Steiner, “Mike Kelley: The Use-Value of Irony, or Sexual Revolution the Monkish Way,” in *Consolation Prize: Mike Kelley and John Miller*, exhibition catalogue (Vancouver, BC: Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, 2000), 36.

91. Ibid., 35–41.

92. The exhibition was titled *Mike Kelley: Odd Man Out*, Patrick Painter, Los Angeles, January 23–February 20, 1999.

93. William Wood, “Final Answer,” in *Consolation Prize*, 47.

94. For a complete transcription of this compilation of articles, see “Meet John Doe,” in Kelley, *Minor Histories*, 300–309.

95. Ralph Rugoff, “Mr. McCarthy’s Neighborhood,” in Rugoff, Stiles, and Di Pietrantonio, *Paul McCarthy* (Phaidon), 65–66.

96. Ibid., 61. *Bonanza* was a popular American television series airing from 1959 to 1973.

97. McCarthy, “There’s a Big Difference between Ketchup and Blood,” 135.

98. Rugoff, “Mr. McCarthy’s Neighborhood,” 61.

99. Ibid., 66.

100. McCarthy acknowledges this reading in “There’s a Big Difference between Ketchup and Blood,” 135.

101. Rugoff, "Mr. McCarthy's Neighborhood," 65–66.

102. *Ibid.*, 65.

CHAPTER SIX

1. "Mom's and Dad's Pussy," *Destroy All Monsters*, 1974–1976 (Ecstatic Peace/Father Yod, 1994).

2. Boas presents this obsession with childhood as fundamental to the mores of American society. According to Boas, in America "the Child has been held up . . . as a paradigm of the ideal man" (George Boas, *The Cult of Childhood* [Dallas: Spring, 1990], 8–9). In *The Making of a Counter Culture* Theodor Roszak extolled America's young people for providing "the saving vision our endangered civilization requires." 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 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" (Theodor Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition* [Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1969], I, 47–51).

3. 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, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 3–15.

4. As Hofmann points out, "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" (*ibid.*, 7).

5. As Robert 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, *Primitivism in Modern Art* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986], 214).

6. For an overview of the interest in child art by these artists and others, see Fineberg, ed., *Discovering Child Art*.

7. Kelley, "Dirty Toys: Mike Kelley Interviewed," interview by Ralph Rugoff (1991), reprinted in Mike Kelley, ed. Thomas Kellein (Basel: Edition Cantz, 1992), 87.

8. 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 formula . . . provid[ing] a means of organizing events, tastes, gestures" (Benjamin De Mott, "The Sixties: A Cultural Revolution," reprinted in *The Cult of Youth in Middle-Class America*, ed. Richard L. Rapson [Lexington, MA: Heath, 1971], 105). Around this same time, conservative sociologist Daniel Bell argued that the neoprimitivism of the youth movement added up to nothing more than "a longing for the lost gratifications of an idealized childhood" (Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* [New York: Basic Books, 1978], 143). For an overview of the advertising industry's co-optation of youth culture, see Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

9. This fabled notion of youth is chronicled by Walter Kendrick in *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1987), 67–94.

10. Kenneth Keniston, *The Uncommitted: Alienated Youth in American Society*, excerpted in *Cult of Youth in Middle-Class America*, ed. Rapson, 88.

11. G. Stanley Hall, *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion, and Education* (New York: D. Appleton, 1904).
12. In *Youth and Life* (1913), for example, Progressivist Randolph Bourne defined the teen years as uniquely conducive to reform. Bourne argued that adolescence 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” (reprinted in *Cult of Youth in Middle-Class America*, ed. Rapson, 47–49).
13. Roszak, *Making of a Counter Culture*, 41.
14. John Demos and Virginia Demos, “Adolescence in Historical Perspective,” reprinted in *Childhood in America*, ed. Paul S. Fass and Mary Ann Mason (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 138.
15. Erik Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968), 128, 132–33.
16. As James Combs points out, “[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, *The Reagan Range: The Nostalgia Myth in American Politics* [Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1993], 88). 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’” (*Sunday Times Magazine*, August 1, 1982, 20).
17. The full script of *The Whole World Is Watching* is printed in *Raymond Pettibon: Plots Laid Thick* (Barcelona: Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 2002), 237–310.
18. As Milton Viorst succinctly put it in 1979, “[The Weathermen] believed they were the vanguard of a great revolution. Instead, their role in history was to mark the end of a movement” (Milton Viorst, *Fire in the Streets: America in the 1960s* [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979], 504).
19. Jon Savage, quoted in *Street, Rebel Rock: The Politics of Popular Music* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 85.
20. “Destroy All Monsters Interviews Itself,” reprinted in *Destroy All Monsters*, n.d., n.p.
21. The SLA was also satirized by Pettibon in his 1989 video *Citizen Tania*—a play on *Citizen Kane*, which was supposedly based on the life of Patty Hearst’s grandfather, William Randolph Hearst. Similar to his treatment of the Weathermen in *The Whole World Is Watching*, Pettibon portrays SLA as a pathetic last gasp of youth culture.
22. For information on Motörhead, see Alan Burridge and Mick Stevenson, *Illustrated Collector’s Guide to Motörhead* (Burlington, ON: Collector’s Guide, 1995).
23. Deena Weinstein, *Heavy Metal: The Music and Its Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 2000), 31–76.
24. *Ibid.*, 18.
25. 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’” (*ibid.*, 130–31).
26. Georges Bataille, “Primitive Art,” in *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: A Documentary History*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 227–29.
27. Ralph Rugoff, “Mike Kelley/2 and the Power of the Pathetic,” in Elisabeth Sussman et al., *Mike Kelley: Catholic Tastes* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993), 162.
28. Kim Gordon, “Is It My Body?” in Sussman et al., *Catholic Tastes*, 180.
29. 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" (Kelley, "Toying with Second-Hand Souvenirs," interview by Paul Taylor, *Flash Art* 154 [October 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 by John Miller, in Mike Kelley, ed. William Bartman and Miyoshi Barosh [New York: Art Resources Transfer Press, 1992], 19).

30. Kelley, "Dirty Toys," 86.

31. "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," reprinted in Kelley, *Foul Perfection: Essays and Criticism*, ed. John C. Welchman [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003], 67).

32. McCarthy, conversation with the author, August 16, 2010.

33. Kelley, conversation with the author, August 19, 2010.

34. Ibid.

35. 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 transplantation, 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. Further, 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 (reprinted in *Cult of Youth in Middle-Class America*, ed. Rapson, 4–6).

36. Demos and Demos, "Adolescence in Historical Perspective," 133.

37. 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 their father (Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* [1835], reprinted in *Cult of Youth in Middle-Class America*, ed. Rapson, 9).

38. Rapson, introduction to *Cult of Youth in Middle-Class America*, ix–x.

39. Francis Wayland Parker, quoted in *Anti-intellectualism in American Life* (1962) by Richard Hofstadter, reprinted in *Cult of Youth in Middle-Class America*, ed. Rapson, 70.

40. As historian Richard Hofstadter pointed out in 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 (Hofstadter, *Anti-intellectualism in American Life*, 67–77).

41. 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" (ibid., 68–75). Despite the important advances it prompted, the overdetermined opposition between childhood and adulthood neglected the diversity and complexity of children and the nuances of their own social milieu.

42. Rapson, introduction, x. In an article on the Students for a Democratic Society, Tom Hayden and Dick Flacks acknowledge that Dewey's theories were fundamental to the 1962 SDS manifesto, "The Port Huron Statement" (see Tom Hayden and Dick Flacks, "The Port Huron Statement at 40," *The Nation*, August 5, 2002, <http://www.thenation.com/article/port-huron-statement-40> [accessed March 1, 2006]).

43. Rapson, introduction, ix.

44. In *Guardians of Tradition: American Schoolbooks of the Nineteenth Century* (1964), Ruth Miller Elson shows this to be a primary ideological trend, one that has underlain two centu-

ries 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 (reprinted in *Cult of Youth in Middle-Class America*, ed. Rapson, 14–15).

45. Todd Gitlin, *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America Is Wracked by Culture Wars* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1995), 78.

46. As James Combs explains, 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” (Combs, *Reagan Range*, 47).

47. Kendrick, *Secret Museum*, 235; Weinstein, *Heavy Metal*, 249–63.

48. Anne Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 153.

49. Kelley, “Dirty Toys,” 87.

50. Mike Kelley, “Three Projects: *Half a Man, From My Institution to Yours, Pay for Your Pleasure*,” reprinted in *Minor Histories: Statements, Conversations, Proposals*, ed. John C. Welchman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 14–15.

51. Mike Kelley, interview by Robert Storr, *Art in America* 82, no. 6 (June 1994): 92.

52. Debates continue over whether Prince’s work is exploitative or critical, pornographic or feminist. See, for example: Carol Squires, “Is Richard Prince a Feminist?” *Art in America* 81, no. 11 (November 1993): 114–19.

53. Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence*, 137.

54. This sensation is often deflected from the viewer onto the artist, who is scapegoated as sick or depraved. As Kelley himself has observed: “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 Replaced with Psychic Reality,” reprinted in *Minor Histories*, 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.

55. Sigmund Freud, “Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria,” in *Complete Psychological Works*, standard ed. (London: Hogarth Press and Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1951), 50.

56. 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*” (Kelley, “Playing with Dead Things,” 67).

57. Of course it was 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: “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*, trans. and rev. James Strachey [New York: Basic Books, 1962], 39).

58. For an overview and examination of Tantra, see Katherine Anne Harper and Robert L. Brown, eds., *The Roots of Tantra* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002).

59. Kelley, “Three Projects,” 14–15.

60. Kelley, “Black Nostalgia,” interview by 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), 54.

61. 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 a 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 has put it, "Childhood, the exhibition implies, is tinged with sexual curiosity" (Kauffman, *Bad Girls and Sick Boys: Fantasies in Contemporary Art and Culture* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998], 25).

62. For an introduction to plushophilia, see David Hill, "Cuddle Time," *Salon.com*, June 19, 2006, <http://dir.salon.com/sex/feature/2006/19/plushies/index.html?pn=1> (accessed November 20, 2008). Kelley acknowledges the connection between his work and plushophilia in a 1999 interview (Kelley, "Black Nostalgia," 53).

63. For McCarthy's own description of this performance, see Ralph Rugoff, Kristine Stiles, and Giacinto Di Pietrantonio, *Paul McCarthy* (London: Phaidon, 1996), 123–25.

64. Ralph Rugoff, "Mr. McCarthy's Neighborhood," in *ibid.*, 82.

65. Paul McCarthy, interview by Chrissie Iles, in *Paul McCarthy: Central Symmetrical Rotation Movement—Three Installations, Two Films*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2008), 62.

66. Jeremy Iggers, *The Garden of Eating: Food, Sex and the Hunger for Meaning* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 54–55.

67. Ilrike Groos, Kristin Schmidt, and Johannes Lothar Schröder, eds., *Paul McCarthy, Videos 1970–1997* (Hamburg: Kunstverein in Hamburg, 2003), 137.

68. Giacinto Di Pietrantonio, "Pinocchio Pipenose Household dilemma," trans. Gilda Williams, in *Paul McCarthy* (Phaidon), 90.

69. Groos, Schmidt, and Schröder, *Paul McCarthy, Videos 1970–1997*, 155–56.

70. R. D. Laing, *The Politics of Experience* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1967), 58.

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

72. Adolf Loos, "Ornament and Crime," in *Ornament and Crime: Selected Essays*, ed. Adolf Opel, trans. Michael Mitchell (Riverside, CA: Ariadne, 1997).

73. Paul McCarthy, "There's a Big Difference between Ketchup and Blood," interview by Marc Selwyn, reprinted in *Paul McCarthy* (Phaidon), 130.

74. Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, 89.

75. 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).

76. 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."

77. Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, *Creativity and Perversion* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984), 2.

78. Erikson, *Identity*, 234.

79. Ralph Rugoff, "Deviations on a Theme: Works by Paul McCarthy," *Artforum International* 33, no. 2 (October 1994): 83.

80. "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, *Identity*, 132–33).

81. *Ibid.*, 253.

82. Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Edred (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 288.

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