
Iliana Antonova
Paul McCarthy, The Box

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Known for his transgressive and often violent performance-based video works, as well as his subversive sculptures, featuring caricatures of popular American icons, American artist Paul McCarthy’s practice has consistently presented the public with works that reside ‘outside the box’ of the conventional. Currently on display in the monumental space of Berlin’s Neue Nationalgalerie is McCarthy’s singular epic work, titled simply The Box. The work initially appears to be just this: an oversized wooden crate, which is positioned at an angle and placed to one side of the large gallery’s interior. From the very onset of stepping into the gallery, viewers find themselves occupying the role of containing artworks into a gallery, thus heightening the presentational context, and establishing the work as an autonomously contained sculptural assemblage.

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

Although The Box puts forth an exact replica of the artist’s studio, we are acutely aware that what is presented is a copy of the original. We imagine the studio as an amorphic site, which is in constant flux, thus we are witness to a copy of the original in a static moment in time, visible from a single vantage point. Functioning very much as a documentary image of the studio, The Box serves as a representation of a private domain that normally is closed off and inaccessible. In his 1971 essay, “The Function of the Studio,” Daniel Buren refers to the studio as an “envelope,” which is “…the first frame, the first limit, upon which all subsequent frames/limits will depend.”

The Box puts forth a total simulacrum of the private as well as mythical space of the artist’s studio. Furthermore, the entirety of the box is tilted at a ninety-degree angle, whereby the floor assumes the position of the wall, and walls become the floor and ceiling and so forth. Functioning very much like a rotating film set, the gravity-defying environment calls for every object to be fixed in place, in effect inverting the ‘boxes’ that traditionally contained sculptural assemblage.

The transparent glass walls of Mies van der Rohe’s space of Berlin’s Neue Nationalgalerie is certainly a prominent theme in the work of McCarthy’s practice itself is the enclosure framesLimits will depend.”

Certainly the idea of the tortured male genius working in isolation within the confines of his studio has prevailed as a popular notion for a very long time. The space of the studio can be juxtaposed with the mental space of the artist’s mind and as such has become manifest as the subject of a number of notable works. For example, in the late 60s Bruce Nauman filmed himself in the context of his studio, executing mundane, repetitive actions. In all of these videos, the studio appears as an empty space in which the artist’s body acts as the singular medium. In Manipulating the T-Bar of 1966, Nauman films himself in the studio as he moves an oversized metal T-bar on his studio floor from one seemingly arbitrary position to another. It is interesting to note that in this video, Nauman sets up the camera at a ninety-degree angle, and in effect, appears to be walking on the wall, similar to the way in which we might imagine the absent artist walking on the wall of The Box. The transparent sincerity of Nauman’s “body” of work operates in direct contrast to McCarthy’s own tortured ascents into a studio-based masochism of the same period. What sets The Box apart from its surroundings of the larger box that houses it and from a characterization of McCarthy’s practice itself is the enclosure of an unprecedented gesture of transparency, sincerity, and grace.

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