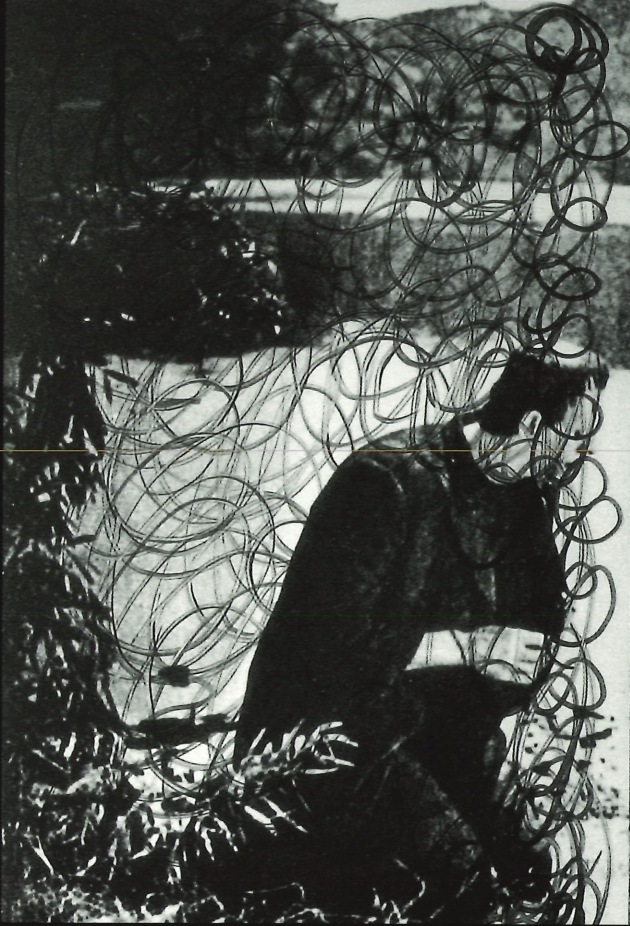


**Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy
Collaborative Works**

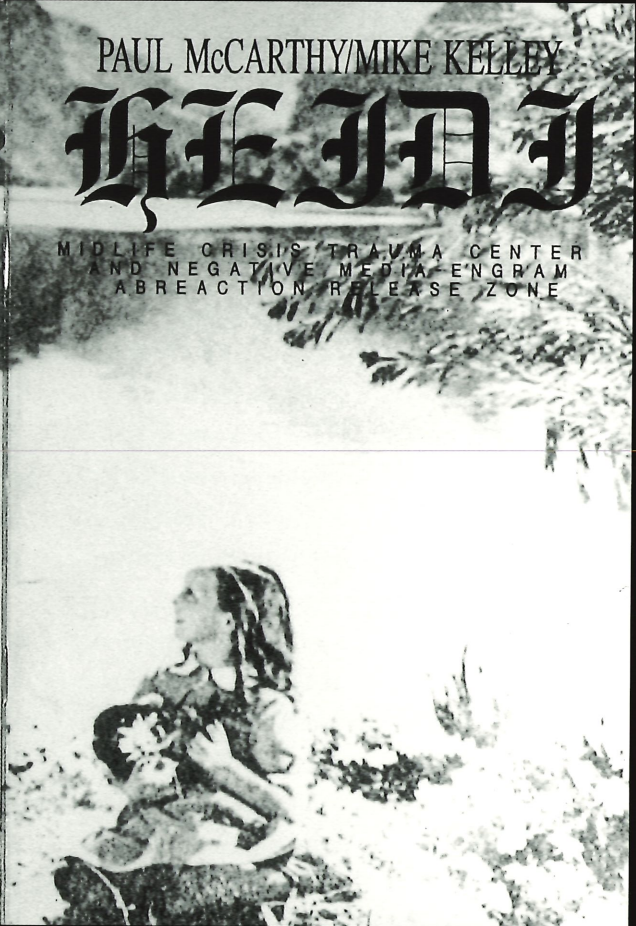
The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery
18 March – 28 May 2000



PAUL McCARTHY/MIKE KELLEY

THE III

MIDLIFE CRISIS TRAUMA CENTER
AND NEGATIVE MEDIA ENGRAM
ABREACTION RELEASE ZONE



A Twisted Pedagogy

Philip Monk

I escaped to the open country, and fearfully took refuge in a low hovel, quite bare, and making a wretched appearance after the palaces I had beheld in the village. This hovel, however, joined a cottage of a neat and pleasant appearance...On examining my dwelling, I found that one of the windows of the cottage had formerly occupied a part of it, but the panes had been filled up with wood. In one of these was a small and almost imperceptible chink, through which the eye could just penetrate. Through this crevice a small room was visible, whitewashed and clean, but very bare of furniture...By degrees I made a discovery of still greater moment. I found that these people possessed a method of communicating their experience and feelings to one another by articulate sounds...I learned and applied the words, *fire, milk, bread, and wood*...I easily perceived that, although I eagerly longed to discover myself to the cottagers, I ought not to make the attempt until I had first become master of their language; which knowledge might enable me to make them overlook the deformity of my figure....

— Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*

Europa/Amerika

In the passage from Europe to America, many things are lost and some are gained. The immigrant leaves behind a culture of the word — more than just his or her native tongue but a moral authority embedded in a literary tradition — to enter a culture where the image predominates. Freedom has to be negotiated in this new terrain of visibility. The immigrant joins the New World as if entering a forest of signs. Yet most of these signs are actually not guideposts but commodities, or they signal commodities. (The settling of America generally coincided with the development of capitalism so that the structures of inhabitation, daily life and commerce here are marked by that system rather than any other traditional values.) Learning in this environment means first knowing how to respond to signs and signals, which is part of a process of adapting to rules of production and consumption.

Cover of *Heidi: Midlife Crisis Trauma Center and Negative Media-Engram Abreaction Release Zone*. Galerie Krinzinger, Vienna, 1992.

Social behaviour must conform to this regime. In America, freedom, as we know it, connotes freedom of choice. Thrown into the marketplace and unhinged from the care and tutelage of tradition, the individual is ostensibly free but offered no instruction in his or her liberty.

In passing from a literary to a visual culture, how does one pass on knowledge and transmit cultural inheritance? Or, given this seeming unfettering, how does one use what is left of tradition to maintain authority, either within the family or society? Society usually allocates these multiple roles to the public domain of education. In America, the entertainment industry has assumed the task of education. Returning to a classical ideal, it uses the popular arts to entertain *and* instruct. Socialization proceeds through seduction. This training contradictorily must repress certain instincts and liberate others for the proper functioning of capitalist society.

A cultural inheritance brought from Europe to America and transformed in the passage makes these lessons and losses clear. The transposition of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* from a Romantic literary text to a 1931 Hollywood movie deprives the monster of reasoned speech so that he is no more than an inarticulate child. What is lost in this translation is the humanizing project of instruction. The whole of Shelley's Godwinian tract argues against the autodidacticism of the obsessed, isolated individual — a task that the monster unwillingly must assume.¹ Both Victor Frankenstein and the narrator Robert Walton are willing exponents of the state into which the monster is unhappily born — that of the outcast. In America, instruction becomes indoctrination. Even the outcast is socialized and isolation is institutionalized. From corporate tower to prison cell, from television screen to hillbilly shack, America is a Skinner Box of behavioural manipulation.

Shelley's Frankenstein is not the psychopathic serial killer he becomes in America where his name is given to the monster. In America, Dr. Frankenstein and his monster become one: a body-obsessed dismemberer morphs with the child-monster. (The plot novelty of the Frankenstein film places the mind of a child in the brain of a criminal in the body of a monster. Such a type is embodied in the monstrous, butchering man-child of *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*.) Here the quest for knowledge, creating life from death, is reversed. Bodies are not put together, but torn apart.²

Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy take up the subject of socializing the individ-

ual in America — which perhaps is *the* American project. At least the immigrant negotiates his or her entry into this culture as an adult, but what happens when a child is born into it, formless, America's "New Man?" This is the dilemma of Frankenstein's monster. Offsprings of the same culture, Kelley and McCarthy should be sympathetic to the monster's plight. They have, after all, been schooled (so to speak) in the reproduction of authority. However, instead of simply submitting, they show they have learned their lessons perhaps a little too well by assuming the masks of both submission *and* authority. In their collaborative works they practise a twisted pedagogy where teachers tend towards the socio-psychopathic, and the students are as outcast, unformed and forlorn as Frankenstein's foul offspring. They are, at the same time, dutiful and disobedient sons of their culture.

Since training for society starts in the family, and the subjection to authority begins with the submission of son to father, perhaps it should come as no surprise that their first performing collaboration is entitled *Family Tyranny: Modeling and Molding*. McCarthy asked Kelley to perform in his 1987 videotape with the only instructions being "I am the father, you are the son." The videotape opens with a written text stating, "The father begat the son. The son begat the father." This is not only a keyhole peek into a household where the reproduction of authority and the family's dirty secret are replayed and passed on in family (sexual) abuse. The videotape is modeled on a typical 1950s television fix-it, hobby show. (Those instructional programmes reinforced the idea that even recreation should sustain an obsessive work ethic.) In a wood-paneled television set/basement workshop, the father prepares a white concoction made out of processed foodstuffs. Using a makeshift styrofoam ball on a stick to stand in as a boy's head, he shows how to force the liquid through a funnel down the throat of this mock child, saying "My daddy made me do this; you can do this to your son, too."

As in Frankenstein's monster's low hovel, the windows of the set allow us to peer, as if through a camera lens, into a "workshop of filthy creation."³ Architecture is both a hidden site of discipline and a surveillance device. As the latter, the set and the camera become one — a means through which society peers into the family, most effectively through the apparatus of television that instructs individuals as to society's dominant values. What was enacted there by Kelley and McCarthy became a prototype for their subsequent collaborations.⁴

If Kelley and McCarthy's mutual interest in repressive family structures brought them together, their subsequent collaborations extended this focus to society's conditioning of the individual through its institutions and cultural representations. In their installations and videotapes, architecture is used both as a model of these social formations and as a structural framework to incorporate the artists' analyses of contradictory cultural phenomena.

It is not fruitful to allocate authorship of individual components or themes to either artist. In some cases, their association entailed what the artists call a "collaborative compromise." For instance, the installation *An Architecture Composed of the Paintings of Richard M. Powers and Francis Picabia* (1997) derived from Kelley's interest in American science-fiction illustrator Richard Powers and McCarthy's interest in French Dadaist-Modernist painter Francis Picabia. This conjunction of names and images and the degraded or elevated practices they represent — one mass-media, the other museum-sanctioned — was a conjecture to be worked out in the resulting art work. We find there that each artist is in not-so-secret communication with the seemingly exclusionary tradition the other represents.

In other cases, Kelley and McCarthy recognized a mutual interest, such as in the comic book character Sad Sack, which was discovered during their collaboration on *Sod and Sodie Sock Comp O.S.O.* (1998).⁵ *Sod and Sodie Sock Comp O.S.O.* is an army tent compound pitched in a former defeated Nazi country (it was first shown in Vienna). In this work, the artists link American military imperialism to the victorious formalism of the post-war period of American art critic Clement Greenberg and the modernist art he championed. His writings appear in a series of strung together, cut-up texts that are appended to the visual documentation of the catalogue spliced into those of Wilhelm Reich and Georges Bataille. The artists' use of Reich's and Bataille's writings on the authoritarian ideology of the family and the mass psychology of fascism not only serve to bring the hierarchies of modernist aesthetic ideals down low, they also unite the themes of Kelley and McCarthy's collaborative works — the army camp replicates and reinforces the authoritarian structure of the family where repression originates. A collusion whose social dimensions cannot be predetermined at the onset, their collaborations are far-ranging in their critiques. They mean much more than allying the resources of the artists' individual concerns to the ends of an aesthetic hybrid.

The complex interactions that take place between the artists in the collaborative process, as a dialogical relationship, inform the structure of the works themselves. For instance, the linkage between architecture and the body as mediated through video; the reciprocity between various institutions of culture that nonetheless hierarchically enforce the distinctions between high and low; and the dialogue between Europe and America as carried on in social theory, art practice and popular cultural memory are dominating themes that recur in their works.

Architecture, Discipline and Instruction

Kelley and McCarthy's first true collaboration, *Heidi: Midlife Crisis Trauma Center and Negative Media-Engram Abreaction Release Zone* (1992), registers some of the complex contrarities they force together. Made for exhibition in Vienna, the work — an architectural construction and videotape — bases itself on Joanna Spyri's children's story *Heidi*, with its oppositions of city and country, culture and nature. "We chose to work with the novel *Heidi*," Kelley wrote, "because it offered many opportunities to work with doublings and polarities which seemed appropriate for a collaborative work."⁶

Like cultural anthropologists, the artists examined the structural dichotomies of the novel with its ideological underpinnings of nature standing for health and culture representing sickness.⁷ But Kelley and McCarthy exacerbated this opposition by piling on further contrarities. In a single construction they combine the Alpine chalet and city house of Spyri's story. So to the contrasts of country/city, nature/culture, health/sickness, they added that of traditional kitsch/modernist art, since the architecture of Viennese modernist and author of "Ornament and Crime," Adolf Loos, was the model for part of the exterior and the Frankfurt bedroom of the Sick Girl (*Heidi*'s counterpart). With the incorporation of Loos and his anti-decoration dogma into this scenario, Kelley and McCarthy's *Heidi* also becomes more obviously "a lesson in aesthetics,"⁸ situating itself, like all their collaborations, in a dialogue with other art movements and works of art.

With an "insistence on the role of beauty as correctness," we are still in the realm of instruction and, ultimately, discipline.⁹ Lessons must be learned. Bodies, as well as art, must be subjected to corrective discipline. In keeping with the stripped-down puritanism of modernism, the tattooed, criminal and degenerate

body (Heidi receives a tattoo in the videotape) must be turned into a functional and disciplined body. According to Loos, ornament exists within the realm of children, primitives and criminals and must be eliminated from civilization. The tattooed body is a sign of collusion, the outward manifestation of an inner perversity whose imprint must then be erased by a teaching that is reinforced by physical gestures in which abuse frequently masquerades as discipline.

On the model of the misshapen body of the child, behaviour needs “orthopaedic” correction. *Heidi*’s Alm Mountain setting, representing nature itself, offers this curative power. But in the videotape, a sometimes irrational discipline must be imposed by the familial representative of authority, the Grandfather. One segment of the videotape is called, as a play on Loos’s title, “Ornament and Education.” The children Heidi and Peter need remedial instruction and rehabilitation but Peter endures more correction as he seems to be the degenerate product of inbreeding. As well, Grandfather and Heidi apparently have need of family counseling for some undisclosed but suspected perversion. Applied instead to this fictional family unit, Loos’s admonition of criminal degeneration suggests that the ornate Alpine chalet might as well be a disguised hillbilly shack, its decorative exterior hiding unwholesome and lewd behaviour — beatings, scopophilia, implied incest and bestiality.

The degeneration of ideals as they travel from the Alps to Appalachia is a theme that recurs throughout the installation and videotape as Kelley and McCarthy’s *Heidi* traces the vestiges of the Old World in American popular culture. These may take the shape of Disneyland’s Matterhorn or Hollywood’s Frankenstein. Yet, rather than memory, *Heidi* stages the fabrications of myth — here of childhood innocence — as nostalgic idealism sundered from and tainted by the shameful reality of the present. The image of the child imported from Europe to America is imbued by a knick-knack Hummel kitschiness. But the child in America, like Frankenstein, has become an untutored monster. “Heidi becomes Americanized in a sort of dysfunctional horror film,” McCarthy confirms.¹⁰ Through reference to the horror genre, particularly to *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, the European origins of this ideal of childhood innocence are displaced by the nightmare of a dysfunctional American family.

This dialogue between Europe and America (as a servile obeisance to authority, that is, the persistent submission of a son to an idealized father) continues in *Az*

Architecture Composed of the Paintings of Richard M. Powers and Francis Picabia and Sod and Sodie Sock Comp O.S.O. But if the former asserts the hierarchies of Old World aesthetics over New World commercial illustration, the avant-garde militarism of the latter forcibly reverses that authority. Yet this military vanguard of American culture is itself undermined by a debased corporeity.

Architecture, Optics and the Body

Architecture is not only a test site for cultural diagnostics, it is a metaphor for the human body as well. The labyrinthine set-construction of stretched canvases in *An Architecture* becomes a mindscape through which the body of the spectator moves. Picabia's abstractions and girly paintings and Powers' biomorphic, futuristic landscapes commissioned for book covers have been rendered in billboard scale by Los Angeles billboard painter Tony Joni. Both artists treat the body: one pornographically, the other displacing it metaphorically into the landscape. Yet, *An Architecture* intentionally reproduces the hierarchy between the two artistic practices. One walks through the corridors of Powers' landscape dioramas to reach the main event of Picabia's soft-core porn palace.

If Picabia's figurative oil paintings deny their mass media photographic sources, Kelley and McCarthy expose their origins by juxtaposing Picabia's practice to that of the illustrator Powers, whose images were conversely destined for mechanical reproduction. (Kelley and McCarthy's employment of a sign painter is a reminder of, and rejoinder to, Picabia's anti-hand-of-the-artist Dadaist origins, conveniently set aside in his figure paintings.) This suppression of sources, so necessary to the sublimations of creativity and the hierarchies of art, is reinforced by the location of the nudes in an inner sanctum. Although we must get there by means of our bodies, once there we obey a scopic regime — the paintings become windows through which we might peer. The ideals of art have their origins in this loss of bodiliness, even as they maintain a sublimated eroticism that Powers' landscapes also embody.

The sequestering of the body, nevertheless destined for the pornographic gaze, appears as well in the videotape *Fresh Acconci* (1995). Here in a Hollywood Hills mansion, a setting typically used in the pornography industry, a cast of nude Hollywood actors reenacts a number of Vito Acconci video performances from the

early 1970s. Kelley and McCarthy's videotape weds the genre of haunted house films to soft-core porn art direction while addressing the then-renewed interest in the (nude) body in performance art. According to the artists, "*Fresh Acconci* postulates that the body-art of today [such as that of Matthew Barney] performs the function of a specialized sub-cultural erotica for the artworld despite its deconstructive pretensions."¹¹ Thus the substitution of the buff bodies of Hollywood actors for that of the uncomely Acconci — the present instance of Kelley and McCarthy's recurrent dichotomy of the ideal and the object — seems to reinforce the elevation of art over the degraded genres of horror and porn. What appears as a joke on both Acconci and contemporary performance art has its own "deconstructive" aim. The translation of Acconci's performances into what we might take at first as strange erotic cult practices only equates art and pornography.

Throughout Kelley and McCarthy's collaborative work, the body that has been occluded from modernism resurfaces in all its unruly rudeness — unencumbered by society's constraints and art's sanitized representations: from the disciplined and abject body of *Family Tyranny* and the disciplined, fragmented, fetishized body of *Heidi* to the eroticized bodies of *Fresh Acconci* and *An Architecture* that are purveyed through art. All of these types are enlisted in *Sod and Sodie Sock Comp O.S.O.* Here the body is not freed; rather, it submits itself fully to a sadistic regime of discipline and indoctrination to authority. The military is the model of bodily regimentation.¹² In the ongoing social conditioning of the individual, the military initiates the rite of passage from adolescence to manhood.

The mock-up of military life in *Sod and Sodie Sock* joins Kelley and McCarthy's "myth analysis" of the abject comic book anti-hero Sad Sack¹³ to a degraded bodily regime regulated by the strict order and hierarchy of the army. But what by "nature" escapes this regime is also what undermines the order of art as well. Kelley and McCarthy foreground the theme of ineptness exemplified in the genre of military comedy, including such television shows as *Hogan's Heroes* and *M*A*S*H*. Presenting the installation in Vienna, the artists unite the aims of American art and military occupation. The work plays upon notions of a homogenous post-World War II male culture common to men's magazines and Abstract Expressionism. Military and aesthetic heroics are subverted by Sad Sackism. This is expressed through the symbolic opposition between the vertical and the horizontal — figured

as phallus and anus — which the artists use to reveal the essentialist core of European idealism that endures in American arts.

What the artists see as the phallic monumentality of the modernist sculptural tradition is brought low in the comic servility of the Sad Sack character. Represented by the sculpture of the European Constantin Brancusi and the American David Smith (their anthropometric sculptures are reproduced in the *Sod and Sodie Sock* catalogue along with fragments of Greenberg's texts on them), monolithic verticality is parodied by the guard tower. In the installation, the combination latrine-guard tower symbolically unites phallus and anus in a scopic surveillance apparatus. Verticality's heroism is opposed to the horizontal disposition of the body's actions, which are performed within the tent compound and subsequently edited for the videotape. From the scopic realm to the physical, prying is abundant in the compound's specialized enclosures; in the transsexual shower scenes, privacy is violated by spying and, in the infirmary, aliens conduct anal probes.

Not surprisingly, the child is latent within the Sad Sack character. And so the relationship between Sarge and Sad Sack not only reproduces that of mother and child but of teacher and student as well. In one of the tents, mess duty becomes children's art therapy. In a parody of both art education and modernist art, an enlisted group of art students made mock heroic monuments from oatmeal.

Through this symbol of military occupation, Kelley and McCarthy bring the dynamic found in *Heidi* back to Europe. The experimental communities of America's settlement reappear in the authoritarian hierarchies of an army compound. The failed issue of a transplanted experiment returns as alien spawn to its source. In this figure of formlessness, the eponymous Sack, an American Frankenstein comes back to haunt the Old World.

NOTES

1. Mary Shelley's text derives its social theories from the writings of her parents, William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft. For Godwin, "all forms of social institutions represent a corruption of the citizen and pervert his ability to form judgements, because they create prejudices...The central tragedy of human existence consists in the solitude that prejudices call forth, a solitude making it impossible to enjoy the happiness of friendship. For Godwin man is naturally good and potentially perfectible...What Mary borrows from her mother's

text is the idea that the evil and the desire to destroy is not innate but rather only engendered once a basically good creature is expelled from his family and his society.” Elisabeth Bronfen, “Rewriting the Family: Mary Shelley’s ‘Frankenstein’ in its Biographical/Textual Context,” Stephen Bann, ed., *Frankenstein, Creation and Monstrosity* (London: Reaktion Books, 1994), pp. 25, 34.

2. A contemporary twist to the body-tinkerer is America’s obsession with alien abductions and probes, in themselves screen images for scenarios of sexual abuse or fears of the alien racial other. This theme surfaces in *Heidi: Midlife Crisis Trauma Center and Negative Media-Engram Abreaction Release Zone* and *Sod and Sodie Sock Comp O.S.O.*

3. Mary Shelley’s description of the monster’s birthplace.

4. In *Heidi: Midlife Crisis Trauma Center and Negative Media-Engram Abreaction Release Zone* and *Sod and Sodie Sock Comp O.S.O.*, architecture functions as a set in which a performance is improvised over a period of time, recorded and then edited as a videotape. The video accompanies the architectural installation, although not necessarily in the same space, so that the two are considered of equal value.

5. “We both had interest in ‘Sad Sack.’ But our interests are actually quite different. Mine had to do with the ‘Sad Sack’ book that was published in the Forties which is a compilation of comic strips done for GI’s during World War II. I saw in it a revealing of American racism and imperialism. Mike’s interest had to do with the characters’ transformation into a model of the family, for kids in the Sixties. There, the stories began to refer more to relationships in patriarchal family structures. We didn’t realize that we had similar interests, and all of a sudden we were working with the same material but from different points of view.” Paul McCarthy, transcript of panel discussion at Secession, Vienna, September 23, 1998.

For Kelley’s comments on Sad Sack, see Robert Storr, “An Interview with Mike Kelley,” *Art in America* 82: 6 (June 1994), p. 91.

6. Mike Kelley, with essays by John C. Welchman, Isabelle Graw, and Anthony Vidler, *Mike Kelley* (London: Phaidon Press, 1999), p. 130. This is an excerpt from Kelley, “Playing with Dead Things,” *The Uncanny* (Arnhem: Sonsbeck 93 and Gemeentemuseum Arnhem, and Los Angeles: Fred Hoffman, 1993), p. 4.

7. This structural analysis also involves the collection and classification of images which in *Heidi* was displayed as three billboards. “*Heidi* was the first work where we combined architecture, sculpture, videotape, the collection and categorization of images and the appropriation of a figure from popular culture. We have established this as a kind of methodology —

the construction of video-architecture and the collection and categorization of found images.” Paul McCarthy, transcript of panel discussion at Secession.

8. Paul McCarthy, with essays by Ralph Rugoff, Kristine Stiles and Giacinto Di Pietrantonio, *Paul McCarthy* (London: Phaidon Press, 1996), p. 126.

9. *Paul McCarthy*, p. 126.

10. *Paul McCarthy*, p. 130. With its manipulation of body parts, reliance on props, doublings and reversals and inversions of roles, the videotape *Heidi* is itself a hybrid monster.

11. From an unpublished manuscript by the artists.

12. “The exercise of discipline presupposes a mechanism that coerces by means of observation; an apparatus in which the techniques that make it possible to see induce effects of power, and in which, conversely, the means of coercion make those on whom they are applied clearly visible... These ‘observatories’ had an almost ideal model: the military camp... The camp was to the rather shameful art of surveillance what the dark room was to the great science of optics.” Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), pp. 170–71, 172.

13. These take place through series of independent drawings by Kelley and McCarthy, (see pages 54–55).