



# Paul McCarthy vs. Yoshua Okón

*Excerpts from a conversation between  
the two artists in Los Angeles in May 2009*

**YO** I am interested in the tension that the camera creates. For instance, in *Bocanegra*, you asked if they were in or out of the joke. I think that they were very much aware of the camera and they were very much aware of how they were being portrayed.

**PM** I guess they were aware of how they were portrayed. I guess it's more about, do they understand who they are in relation to the culture? Or how the culture might perceive them? I guess they are. I guess they know in a way that they're in a minority. It's a type of involvement in something that has a lot of taboos to it and a lot of individuals hate.

**YO** Yes, it's not correct.

**PM** It's very angry. They're very angry.

**YO** You're not supposed to be behaving like that.

**PM** They have to have, to some degree, some real understanding. They probably know that they have to keep a secret. How far do they let it out? And they have each other; they cling together, so they have support.

**YO** Exactly. And it is then when the camera becomes very interesting. On one hand, it makes you very much aware of how you're being perceived from the outside. On the other hand, you can always argue that it was fiction.

**YO** That's when you're filming it in that situation. But in the real situation, when the camera is not there, do they dress up?

**YO** They told me that they sometimes wear their costumes when they get together.

**PM** I mean, they don't go to restaurants together dressed in those clothes.

**YO** No, they don't go out in public. So that's the thing; the presence of the camera is very important, because it completely alters the situation. I think that they're incredibly aware of it.

**PM** Isn't that a minor part to all of this?

**YO** A minor part?

**PM** Yes, isn't that a minor part to what you are doing?

**YO** I think it is a major part. The whole soap opera thing and the fact that you are being recorded. So, you were saying that the presence of the video itself is secondary?

**PM** Well, not that it is... The pieces wouldn't be what they are if they weren't videotapes. It's videotapes, it's integral to the tapes, to the piece being what they are. And the camera certainly affects—

**YO** The situation—

**PM** —the situation. But I don't think that's—

**YO** The content in itself.

**PM** And that's not the critical point. The work isn't something where you set up a situation for the camera to affect what's going on. You don't set up that situation; it's kind of in there...

**YO** But it's not a central issue.

**PM** No, and the central issue has to do with what? What is the central issue in your work? It's like cultural exposure of humans, of people.

**YO** Yes.

**PM** And are you even in any of them? You're always on the outside?

**YO** Yes, I am. It's an exposure. One of the reasons I shot it with three cameras was because you see a microphone here and then you very often see me directing.

**PM** As a cameraperson or director.

**YO** Exactly, as a director. And it's structured in a way that you're very much aware of the role of the camera.

**PM** But again, I think that is secondary to whatever really is going on.

**YO** If you think about the way media affects everyday life and the other way around... [...] In everyday life and in the way that we behave, there is a big degree of theatricality, a big degree of performance happening already.

**PM** But you create situations in which it is a heightened theater, like the camera and the situation that you ask them to be part of. Whether it's like the arguing with a real cop, or the pretend confrontation with the police officer or the cop, or the meditating security guards. You ask them to act; you ask them to be part of something, a situation.

**YO** Exactly, I'm kind of openly manipulating the situation or openly constructing a situation. When you're watching the videos, it's there. It's not hidden.

**PM** Do you ever lie to them?

**YO** My policy is not to lie. I always try to be as straightforward as possible. It's always like, "I'm an artist, and this is going to be shown in the context of art." To someone who is not familiar with the art context, it's complicated to fully explain the context, but I try.

**PM** You tell them the truth.

**YO** I tell the truth.

**PM** Do you ever say, like with the Nazi guys, "Gee, I think that you're really racist pigs"?

**YO** No.

**PM** Because maybe that's not so clear, or was it very clear? What part do you tell them?

**YO** And what part you don't?

**PM** Yes. [...]

**YO** I think, in a general way, a lot of my work is about stereotypes, the way that we perceive reality. In many ways, the idea behind these videos is for a lot of these preconceived ideas of what the reality is about, to somehow collapse through the process of watching. So, in that sense, to me the work is more about the spectator than about who is being portrayed.

**PM** I was just trying to figure out the ground you tromp in. I mean, there is an intention to expose. There's a matter of exposing contradictions and something about a fucked up contradiction, a contradiction and a fucked up situation of society. You kind of poke your finger at that all the time.

**YO** Yes, I think that I'm very much interested about how these very specific people and these very specific situations are also giving you a picture of how much they are talking about or reflecting a bigger picture, a bigger scenario of things.

For instance, the Nazi guys, they're all of a sudden talking about borders and issues about nationalism. They talk about the true sense of National Socialism. These are ideas that I hear all the time, all around me. They're not ideas that are so far-fetched. I think that a lot of these contradictions are not only in these guys; they are also in a lot of aspects of our society. Ultimately, I want you to think about the way you relate to the world and the way you somehow construct the notions that we have about society and where we live. To me, these videos, they really spring from a very basic curiosity of how the world operates and how power operates. That's when the performance comes; I don't have the answers to begin with. But I'm dissatisfied with a lot of common notions and dissatisfied with a lot of stereotypical ideas or views. To me, the function of these videos is to, hopefully, in a way, as a spectator, put you in a position where you have to rethink a lot of these notions. It exposes contradictions.

**PM** Rethink what notions?

**YO** Different cases, but for instance, notions of even what the Nazis are about. I come from a Jewish family and we are taught how to respond to things in a very conditioned way, you learn to think about things and understand things. I guess that is kind of the basis for stereotypes. Right? To me these situations that I am creating are not ultimately about these guys or these groups, but more about us. It's more about what do we have in common, more than what we don't. For instance, in *Lago Bolsena* it's about the perception of otherness, and that's a very human thing. Create this kind of very humanized version of what you don't know.

**PM** Yes. That does happen. You watch the tape and you're very aware of the people. Like in all the tapes that I know of yours, I don't think of them as actors. I think of them as people who maybe kind of play in a type of theater situation that you may have created.

**YO** But in a way they're kind of performing themselves... They're ordinary citizens.

**PM** On the street.

**YO** Yes, people put into a situation.

**PM** Put into a theater situation.

**YO** Put into a theater situation.

**PM** And then, who they are in their lives is part of that, or it connects to those situations. In most cases, you're not aware about how fucked up they might be, they don't come off as really fucked up, even the Nazi guys. If it wasn't Nazis and they were dressed up as baseball players, and they acted out the same thing, you probably wouldn't... The soap thing<sup>1</sup> is really fucked up. That soap deal... [...] I was thinking about the installation and how sculptural some of the pieces are.

Most of your work is video oriented? Not all of it, but a lot of it?

**YO** A lot of it, like a big, big percentage of it.

**PM** Eighty or ninety percent?

**YO** Eighty or ninety percent and also 80 or 90 percent is a video performance.



**PM** Performance in front of the camera. That's what I meant by a type of theater.

**YO** Whenever I conceive a piece, I think of it in sculptural terms as much as I think of it as video.

**PM** That's kind of my question when I asked about what importance art plays. What importance does sculpture play? Do you use those terms? Or do you have videotape that you make and then that you find the way? You're thinking of the attempt to make something that involves the viewer physically. They enter it, they're surrounded by it, there's an object that's with it, there's a situation. You put the viewer in a more physically active situation.

To some degree, the term "expanded cinema," which I don't think actually qualifies here... It's some sort of installation video with the purpose of the viewer making some kind of associations. So, it means that your work involves video, and the video is then placed into some type of situation.

**YO** It's put into some type of situation on the one hand—

**PM** —sculpture, object, room, and space.

**YO** Yes, but also it's not linear, which I also think makes a huge difference. In other words, in this case, it's really up to the viewer, it's up to you how long you stay, which creates a very different relationship to the image.

**PM** And it's an acceptance of that as a medium. It's almost like that is the medium. The medium is the making of the tape, the placing of that tape or tapes into an environment that the viewer then interacts in.

**YO** Interacts. Exactly. It's a very interactive role in a sense.

**PM** In a way, it's sculpture. Is that what happens? Is that how people view it? It's almost like you say, "Well, I make a video tape and then it becomes a sculpture." To some degree, you place it into a situation that allows making the video do something else, the image to do something else.

I was thinking of my pieces. Would I think of them as sculpture, or as coming out of sculpture? Yes, they have references because I understand certain ideas or sculptural references. And then they come really out of stage sets and film sets and television sets and Disney amusement park rides, like going through an environment.

**YO** Yes, so is sculpture the right word or not?

**PM** With the Nazi one, with the monitors hanging from the ceiling around you, that's like a film in the round or a 360-degree film of some sort, around your head.

**YO** Even better than IMAX.

**PM** Yes, like IMAX. The Gaza stripper one has more real sculpture elements, like the disco ball or how the monitors are placed upside down. It resembles like... it's sculptural in a certain contemporary way.

**YO** Yes, but also if you think about sculpture in the traditional ideas of what a sculpture is, being an object, in that sense, it's also more of a sculpture, a physical object.

**PM** Yes, it's also more like an auto fair.

**YO** Yes. I guess another word that can be used is "installation." For some reason, I always find myself avoiding that word. I mean, some people say, "video installation," that kind of implies that it's an environment that might or might not include objects.

**PM** An installation. I remember a while back I was thinking about that and I looked that up somewhere. Isn't installation—not necessarily—but is it site specific? Maybe it's not. You install it.

**YO** I think that an installation takes into account the architectural reality, right?

**PM** Yes. To a certain degree, you could refer to them as video sculpture maybe more than an installation.

**YO** More than video installation, right?

**PM** Yes, like maybe an installation where you place the monitor in reference to how you enter the room or what the room is. It's contextual.

**YO** Yes, so I guess sculpture in a way explains it a little better, or it is a little more accurate than installation.

**PM** Is sculpture...? I mean if you have a... I don't know. It doesn't really matter.

**YO** It doesn't really matter.

**PM** But it is the language you use to talk about this.

**YO** But you have to use a word to describe it.

**PM** I guess I was just wondering how you align yourself with the history of art.

**YO** Video art is a very bad one. I never use it.

How do you refer to your pieces? What do you do? Let's say you bump into a lady that has come to see your lectures thinking she's going to see Paul McCartney, and she has no idea of anything. "Oh, so you're not Paul McCartney, you're Paul McCarthy. So what do you do?"

**PM** I don't know. At that level, the conversation is ridiculous probably, but if I talk about them, I use all those terms, I think. "Video art." I say, "video art." No, I don't, but it's not necessary in a way. Maybe I don't use it because it seems a little like a passé word or it's a word that's not necessary. Although people call—might call—people call people video artists.

**YO** Video artists, yes.

**Paul McCarthy** was born in Salt Lake City in 1945 and currently lives and works in Los Angeles. He studied as an undergraduate at the University of Utah and the San Francisco Art Institute, and he holds an MFA from the University of Southern California. His artwork has been featured in museums around the world; he has had solo exhibitions at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, Tate Modern in London, and the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, and he has been included in recent group exhibitions at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.

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**I** In one of the videos of *Bocanegra (Masturbantführer)*, the main actor, dressed as a Nazi, is supposedly giving a speech to the Jews and says, "I bring good news and bad news. The good news is that you're going to visit the best hotels in Europe. The bad news is that you're going like this," and he pulls out a bar of soap.