

Paul and the Chocolate Factory

For his latest installation, sculptor Paul McCarthy is turning a New York gallery into a bona fide, operational candy plant.

Portrait by DANIEL HENNESSY



The artist Paul McCarthy has long employed food as a material in his work—particularly viscous substances such as ketchup, mayonnaise and chocolate, which he has used in videos and performances as stand-ins for the bodily fluids they most closely resemble.

But this holiday season, he is taking things up a notch. In a project that combines his interest in food with a critique of artwork as commodity, McCarthy is transforming a New York gallery into a working chocolate factory for six weeks.

"I kept talking about doing this," McCarthy says by phone from his home in Los Angeles. "I decided this was the year."

The factory, at Maccarone in the West Village, will make and sell figurines based on one of McCarthy's sculptures, *Santa With Butt Plug*, a bronze version of which was exhibited at Art Basel in Switzerland this year by his dealer, Hauser & Wirth. The plant will produce about 1,000 figurines daily, which will be priced comparably to other high-end chocolates. Meanwhile, would-be customers can observe the mechanics of chocolate making: the machines that melt and temper, or crystallize, the chocolate; the spinner, which distributes it evenly over the interior surface of the mold; and the conveyor belt, which takes the finished figurines to the packaging room. "My gallery as a working place disappears and will succumb to the factory," says owner Michele Maccarone.

McCarthy, 62, first explored the idea of manufacturing chocolates as part of his contribution to Expo 2000 in Hanover, Germany, but the fair's caterer wouldn't let him produce food (though he did sell chocolate bars out of a vending machine inside his giant inflatable sculpture titled *Blockhead*). To him, the factory functions as art on many levels. "The candy figurine is a sculpture," he says, "but



I also think of the equipment as sculpture and the liquid pouring through the equipment as another type of art process or sculpture."

On another level, the extensive modifications the gallery must undergo to become a factory are themselves a kind of process art. According to the project manager Maccarone hired, Brian Donohue, the air-conditioning, electrical and plumbing systems all have to be overhauled before the factory opens in mid-November, both to meet New York City health codes and to accommodate the highly specific temperature and humidity requirements of chocolate making.

McCarthy's work has long critiqued consumerist society, according to Paul Schimmel, chief curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. *Santa Claus*, for instance, shows up in his drawings from the late Sixties, but the approach is "not the mechanical high gloss of New York Pop; it's already kind of mutating and political," Schimmel says. McCarthy, who bears no small resemblance to Saint Nicholas, describes *Santa* as simultaneously commodified and culturally sacred—"tied up with consumption, materialism and children."

In terms of the chocolate factory, which tweaks the idea of the gallery as mere commercial establishment, McCarthy is unsure whether success or catastrophic failure would make it a more compelling artwork. In one of his fantasies, the machines would churn out so many figurines, and sales would be so dismal, that the gallery would end up with chocolate figurines stacked to the ceiling, covering employees' desks and clogging bathrooms and hallways.

But in another vision, he imagines selling franchises, like numbered editions. Initially the factory will make a Christmas figurine, but in the future it could produce figurines for Easter, Halloween, Thanksgiving.

"The factory evolves," he projects. "I want it to go on for five, 10 years. It adds equipment, it adds molds, it produces a series, it has a Web site. And it functions as a sidebar, or a metaphor, for art."

—KATE TAYLOR

From top: Paul McCarthy in his Baldwin Park, California, studio; chocolate figurines based on McCarthy's sculpture *Santa With Butt Plug*.

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