

so weird!

the act of the weirdo in visual arts

dovilė aleksandravičiūtė

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introduction

Lady Gaga was born this way. Outstanding, loud, different, with a meaty dress on and manicured paws up. Lady Gaga was born to say that indeed, she was born this way. "I am an artist, and I have the ability and the free will to choose the way the world will envision me."¹ She popularized and "mainstreamed" a plethora of things. Even though her music may not be the most innovative in contemporary pop sounds, the persona she plays is. She consciously inhabits and visualizes all things considered "strange" or that deviate from socially constructed norms. As millions of her fans bravely declared their oddities as their strengths, defending them with their paws up I wondered: why? And what is going on? Although Lady Gaga seems to be slowly fading away, the phenomenon is continuing to live strong and prosper. Which makes me wonder: do we as a society inherently love strangeness? Do we need it? Does it feed us? And if so, why? And who supplies us with the weird?

Even though the topic seems subjective, I tried to approach it from theoretical point of view and look into the concept of strangeness as a specific motif in the art field. I tried to approach

¹ Lady Gaga, http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/l/lady_gaga.html 13-04-2015.

it from theoretical point of view and look into the concept of strangeness as a specific motif in the art field. I used the writings of Michael Foucault as a springboard and theoretical baseline to think about this topic, especially *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*². In it the role of *the Other* (any kind of other) becomes crucial. It stands at the core of self-determination and self-reflection, not just for a society but for an individual as well. In the book Foucault focuses on the historical background of the issue, and proceeds to discuss different social groups, which have played the role of *the Other*³ throughout the Western history. The span is rather broad; from lepers to mental patients – but the idea which stuck with me the most could be concluded in one rather simple formula: a “healthy” society needs somebody “sick” so it can better define its norms. It can be narrowed down to the individual level as well; in encountering a “sick” person and comparing myself to him/her allows me to see the dissimilarities between them

² Foucault, M., *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, Vintage, 1988.

³ “Once leprosy had gone, and the figure of the leper was no more than a distant memory, these structures still remained. The game of exclusion would be played again, often in these same places, in an oddly similar fashion two or three centuries later. The role of the leper was to be played by the poor and by the vagrant, by prisoners and by the ‘alienated’...”, *ibid*, page 48.

an I, therefore I am able to conclude that I am in fact, “healthy”.

But while Michael Foucault talks about rather extreme cases of madness, the same formula could be applied to the casual small deviations in everyday “healthy” society. This is what the figure of the weirdo does. In my opinion art pioneers in detecting, absorbing and mirroring all those deviations back to the viewer. As an example I will look at the artistic practice of Paul McCarthy and Pyotr Pavlensky in which *the weirdo*, *the madman* or *the Other* become key characters.

“They must be out of their minds!” my grandmother bluntly said once she viewed their works. My humble middle-class grandmother was born and raised in pre-soviet Lithuania, where most of visual art she encountered was a celebration of beautiful Lithuanian landscapes; its fields, forests, and running streams. My grandmother – a working mother in Soviet Lithuania, where the majority of visual art was meant to depict the core virtues of the socialist worker, or to raise spirits and move forward towards a bright future.

“They must be out of their minds!” My grandmother bluntly said once I showed their works to her. This art was rough, and targeted everything that is wrong, vicious, and evil. My grandmother still has the ability to react to things intuitively, especially when she thinks that she doesn’t un-

derstand them.

When I put my intuition aside and tried to think about their oeuvre (because I do "understand") what innately intrigued and puzzled me was the feeling of instant recognition of the personas being played, their deep connection with everyday life, yet, the strong feelings of alienation and detachment. They seem to feast on the distortions of everyday life, yet mock normality while trying to visualize and mirror a particular inner drive. Furthermore, they seem to push towards extremes and then expose them back to the viewer. As if that's where they came from. *We must be out of our minds.*

Delving into the content, researching and reading about these artists, the main keywords and theoretical background used to approach their works kept reappearing. This was the theory of the uncanny. A theory formulated and discussed by Sigmund Freud in his essay *The Uncanny*⁴ stems from his psychoanalytic point of view. It has a strong connection with Freud's notion of human psyche as made from subconscious and conscious parts, which operates on three levels: Id, ego and super-ego⁵.

⁴ Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', 1919, in: <http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/freud1.pdf> 6-12-2014.

⁵ *Id* - is the agency, which holds instinctual inner drives; the *super-ego* plays the critical and moralizing

In this theory, the uncanny is something that was once familiar but for various reasons was sent from the conscious to subconscious. Despite that, it finds it's way back into the foreground of consciousness and creates discomfort and tension. It always reminds of our Id, our repressed and forbidden impulses and it can show up in dreams, slips of the tongue, and desires, etc.

This approach was a springboard for many theories that later followed. Most importantly, in the art field it served as a starting point to approach horror movies, as well as a source of creativity. The big impact in connecting this approach of creativity and theory was Mike Kelley. In 2004, he curated an exhibition called *Uncanny*⁶, which explored "memory, recollection, horror and anxiety through the juxtaposition of a highly personal collection of objects with realist figurative sculptures."⁷ The exhibited works evoked an eerie feeling within viewers through the use of scale,

role; and the ego is the organized, realistic part that works as a mediator between the desires of the Id and the moral standarts of super-ego. The super-ego can stop one from doing certain things that one's Id might want to do.

⁶ Mike Kelley "Uncanny" at Tate Liverpool, 20th of February - 3rd of May, 2004.

⁷ *The Uncanny: Where Psychology Meets Art*, <http://whitecubediaries.wordpress.com/2013/02/21/the-uncanny-where-psychology-meets-art/> 6-12-2014.

color, materials, and aesthetic.

The works of Paul McCarthy and Pyotr Pavlensky can be put into the same practice. Looking and thinking about their oeuvre, there is always a feeling of balancing between "normality" and "insanity", expressing certain deeper, inner, sometimes repressed feelings (especially in the case of Paul McCarthy). This creates the tension between the *I* of an artist and the *I* of the viewer. Furthermore, because it is presented in the art field, rationality plays an evident role for which the acts should be investigated and examined more closely. The understanding of acting and recognition of the distortion of the recognizable and relatable acts or situations creates an uncanny feeling. But why do they want or need to evoke those tensed feelings? And does the act of the weirdo actually work? If so, how and why?

1. weirdo - the term

Plainly put, *the weirdo* is a figure who stands as a middle point between "normality" and "madness", or rather socially accepted abnormality, which is paradoxically considered to be normal and necessary to exist.

When trying to determine what I consider *the weirdo*, I sense the figure was always positioned in the negation or comparison with other figures like: *normal person*, *madman* and *the other*. In the table below I present a comparison between the weirdo and those figures.

<u>normal person</u>	<u>madman</u>	<u>the Other</u>	<u>weirdo</u>
healthy	medically ill. Therefore, there is a scheme or a framework for diagnosis	healthy	healthy
	institutionalized		
free	isolated / hidden	isolated or sometimes happens to be isolated "by circumstances"	free

		(e.g. roma- ni community living in a special ar- eas of the cities and facing cer- tain diffi- culties to move to the other areas)	
integrated in the soci- ety	outcasted	outcasted or finds diffi- culties to integrate	integrated in the so- ciety but can be an outcast in the smaller scale (e.g. can have a job, a house, func- tion in a so- cial frame- work, but might have no friends, be teased, gossiped or ill-looked upon
function- al in the everyday so- cial life, determines	non-func- tional in the everyday soacial life	function- al in the everyday so- cial life but might	function- al in the everyday so- cial life

it		find difficul- ties to in- tegrate	
independant	dependant	independant	independant
	can be cured		
secure	dangerous	not danger- ous per-se but can be considered to be so	not danger- ous per-se but can be considered to be so
stable	unpredict- able	can be con- sidered to be unpre- dictable be- cause the framework of behaviour might be un- known	can be con- sidered to be unpre- dictable be- cause the framework of behaviour might be de- viated
acts accord- ing socially accepted so- cial norms, expects oth- ers to act according them as well	does not ap- ply moral standards, consciously or subcon- sciously ig- nores or ne- gates them	applies cer- tain moral standards, but they might be different or unknown for the rest	does not al- ways apply socially ac- cepted mor- al norms or conscious- ly ignores, negates or distorts them

As the table suggests, *the weirdo* stands in be-
tween normality and madness. It holds the charac-
terizations of both but none of them in their ex-

treme fullness. Therefore, it is accepted in a society.

2. character

In the field of visual arts the figure of *the weirdo* always appears as a character - a construction of fiction, and therefore, not real. Sometimes this "unrealness" is obvious but sometimes the line between the character and the person playing the character is extremely thin.

The masks, costumes or make-up artists used seem to stand as a visual confirmation of *the weirdo* being encountered. They help to speed up our prejudice and categorize them as *weirdos* within a few seconds, justifying our initial response. On the other hand, the importance of the context, and specificity of the "receiver" becomes very important and therefore lead to two different approaches:

General art related viewer.

Impulse > this is strange

Reaction > why is it strange? What is the artist trying to communicate? How? Why? How do I feel? Are my feelings part of the artist's intentions? Do I like or dislike it? Is it good work of art?

General art not related viewer.

Impulse > this is strange

Reaction > Is this art? I don't understand it.

Furthermore, costumes both shield and expose the character simultaneously. Lana Reyey touches upon the latter aspect in her article *A Few Words for Dead H* on Paul McCarthy's work: "The masks he dones [sic!] provide not only pop personalities that gratify the viewer's desire for identification, but also dark, private spaces in which McCarthy can hide."⁸

Hiding or masking can be liberating as well. One of the most obvious examples that comes to mind is Stanley Ipkiss in Chuck Russell's movie *The Mask*⁹ (played by Jim Carrey), who after putting the mask on not only gained abnormal powers but also released all charisma, adventurousness, and wittiness, he already possessed but didn't dare express unmasked. He took the mask as an opportunity to act in the way he wanted; to be witty, fun, daring, demanding, and brave. All that Stanley Ipkiss dreamt to be, but never dared to be in his natural appearance.

⁸ Lana Reyey, *A Few Words for Dead H*, Parkett 73, 2005, page 105.

⁹ *The Mask*, director Chuck Russell, 1994, Dark Horse Entertainment and New Line Cinema, USA.

2.1. Paul McCarthy

That is exactly what Paul McCarthy does; he hides, letting invented personas envelop him. He lends his body for others to act out, to mumble, to spill ketchup or mayonnaise, to dance, to paint, to stuff sausages in mouths, to challenge the audience. All the while, Paul McCarthy is nestled safely inside the costume, and the costumed character is nestled safely inside the gallery, surrounded by the audience, or inside the TV screen. The costume forces the audience to understand that this is art, and even though the gallery goers are a rather specific audience; trained to see art - my poor grandmother understands it as art as well. She doesn't like it, she doesn't value it, she even sneers when she is asked to think about it. "There is nothing to think about. That is what is wrong with our world nowadays."

But this is exactly what is so wrong and yet so right with Paul McCarthy's work. His inspiration is found in B-Movies, Disneyland, Soap Operas, Comics, mass media and consumerist societies. He then criticizes and celebrates it at the same time. He uses almost the same language; things have to be loud-louder-loudest to be heard, bright-brighter-brightest to be seen. He understands this, exploits it, and then exposes it back. He's like a

dirty pop artist who carved open the pretty face of contemporary popular culture and pulled the bloody guts out. You can still see the hints of a pretty face, but the copious amount of dirt that was brought to the surface can no longer be masked.

I am compelled to think about Heidi from Johanna Spyri's book¹⁰. A poor girl from a protagonist "for children and those who love children"¹¹ turned into a character in the dark and nightmarish world of Paul McCarthy and Mike Kelley¹². As Paul McCarthy said: "The intention was to create convoluted associations between Heidi, the purity myth in America and Europe and the media view of family life, horror movies and ornamentation – the grandfather, Heidi and Peter, a rural family. The Grandfather is abusive and senile. Peter is retarded. Heidi is Madonna and the sick girl is a vision."¹³ Nothing is subtle nor comforting there. There is no stable ground on which you can lean on to get a grasp of

¹⁰ *Heidi* is a fictional novel by Swiss author Johanna Spyri written in 1880 and first published as two part story: *Heidi's years of learning and travel* and *Heidi makes use of what she has learned*.

¹¹ As it says in the 1899 edition; *Heidi – for children and those who love children*.

¹² Paul McCarthy and Mike Kelley, *Heidi*, 1992, 62:40 min.

¹³ Paul McCarthy and Mike Kelley, *Heidi*, <http://www.eai.org/title.htm?id=2319> 25-01-2015.

sanity. And as the book was disturbingly sweet and "good" this is disturbingly rough and "bad".



Paul McCarthy and Mike Kelley, *Heidi*, 1992, 62:40 min.

2.2. Piotr Pavlensky

If I think about Paul McCarthy as someone who still “plays it safe”, Piotr Pavlensky seems to take it one step further. The work of Piotr Pavlensky is strongly political, but more specifically; it is directed towards the contemporary Russian political situation. Most importantly, it can stand alone as an explicit example of certain responses towards performance art which balances between madness and reality.

The work of this artist could be described as *bodily work*, and not just because the artist is present and acts out all the actions/performances himself. Body mutilation seems to be one of the main motifs in his work, and plays a strong factor to gather attention and spread his message. Yet again, the work has to be loud-louder-loudest to be heard and bright-brighter-brightest to be seen. Furthermore, Piotr Pavlensky doesn't hide in the comfort of a costume on the contrary, his act is usually performed naked¹⁴.

Throughout the time a certain pattern seems to

¹⁴ Even though nakedness can also be considered to be a certain costume. It does provide a visual recognition and distinguishes an artist from a regular, dressed crowd.



Piotr Pavlenski, 3rd of May, 2013, St. Petersburg, Russia.



Piotr Pavlenski, 10th of November, 2013, St. Petersburg, Russia.

settle and most of his work follows a specific structure. An artist undresses, goes to a public place, carries out his action, an audience gathers, press appears, authorities come (police or/ and ambulance), covers him with a blanket, stops his action, puts him into a car (police's or ambulance's) and takes him away for "further investigation".

Pavlensky's latest work of art, performed in October, 2014 gained a lot of media attention but seemed to follow the same scenario.

Naked Piotr Pavlensky climbed on the concrete wall of a mental institution with a big dagger in his hand, sliced off his ear-lobe and then just sat there with a blood streaming down his body. The audience, press and authorities appeared, circulating around for some time, then police officers climbed the wall, took Piotr Pavlensky down and brought him to the hospital. But what followed later I think is rather interesting:

Dazed Digital/Marina Galperina: How are you feeling?

Petr Pavlensky: I feel excellent. Actually, there was no need for me to go into a hospital. It could have been fixed with a band-aid and I would have gone on with my day.

What happened after you were removed?

Petr Pavlensky: The action took place over two hours. It was quite cold. The representatives of

authority were continuously trying to provoke me. When they put the mat down below, it was like placing food in front of someone on a hunger strike. The point was to endure. I was prepared to sit there all day. They pointed, cursed, shouted. But the mat was a distraction. They snuck up from the back, fell on me, twisted all my extremities. They placed me in handcuffs and tied my legs, strapped me to a gurney and lowered me off the wall with ropes.

When did you start speaking?

Petr Pavlensky: When my action came to an end in the hospital and I had to give my name and lawyer's number. That was after they injected me with something. Valium, I think? The doctor was very pleased reporting that that's what made me communicate. That's not true. The doctor decided I had some sort of mystery psychiatric disorder and needed further observation.

I was driven to a different hospital's psychiatric ward. A terrifying place, decrepit. Dirty walls, peeling paint. There was a painting of a train. I got this sensation that it's all in a context of a day care center. I asked the doctor, why? "Well, so they can remember childhood, of course! When you were happy and taken care of. It's calming."

It's nonsense, of course. Half of the people there are drooling. I later found out that's called "passive" ("nonviolent"). The "passive" ones are basically vegetables. Once you do anything other than that, like start talking, asking questions or make any effort to assess your predicament, you're instantly labeled as "excited" ("violent"). I had a conflict with one of the staff within 20 minutes and they restrained



Piotr Pavlenski, Segregation, October, 2014, Serbsky psychiatry center, Moscow, Russia.

me to the bed. I was given a proposition: if I just lie there and not say anything, they offered to take off the restraints. That's how it works. The Investigative Committee has tried to get three separate courts to condemn me as insane (for burning the tires in the Red Square), but they just can't find a judge who would. I am required not to leave the city while I'm being investigated and ask for permission and papers if I must. Not restrained, but tied down nonetheless.

Funnily enough, I was able to wiggle out of the leg restraints under the blanket. The doctor and a group of staff came by and sat down, with the doctor's head quite within kicking distance. I showed the doctor that my legs were free... Look, I'm not going to try to hurt anyone, so

what is the point? I talked to the doctor then, explained why I was doing this.

After that they picked a new tactic. They said I was in a severe, critical state and required life support. I was put into restraining clothing and transferred to an emergency wing. There was always someone in a room with me. They proceeded to terrify all the staff in the hospital, made a show of asking me not to damage or break anything because this is the life support section of the hospital; they are saving lives here, etc. At a point, a nurse tried to inject me with Haloperidol (an anti-psychotic). I didn't let him. He tried to put it into a vial of glucose to trick me. But I didn't let him. I spent the night there. Another doctor came and talked to me. She said, "This is all very interesting. And strange." She didn't see that there was ever a need to transfer me to the life support wing out of the psychiatric hospital. She declared me "normal" according to the system of the psychiatric treatment. I didn't really need them to tell me because I reject their framework. I would have been ready in any case, even if that meant more time there.¹⁵

It is obvious the performative act was approached from non-artistic point of view, leading to all procedures that are required when a "sick" person is being approached. Suddenly, Pavlensky was not

¹⁵ Marina Galperina, *Earlobe-slicing artist Petr pavlensky: 'I feel excellent'*, in: <http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/22278/1/earlobe-slicing-artist-petr-pavlensky-i-feel-excellent> 6-12-2014.

just a *weirdo*; an eccentric artist acting a role in his performance – he was a sick person who needed medical attention. He was a madman. Of course the fact that the performance took place in Russia and was meant as a critique towards Russian political situation should not be overlooked and the perception of the work in other countries could be just speculated.

The extremes that Piotr Pavlensky tends to go seem an almost natural response for the political activist/artist in contemporary Russia. To get a more critical message through a subtle approach is not a solution. Piotr Pavlensky literally mutilates his body as a symbolic act of the political actions carried against the Russian society as a whole. He also uses it as a “metaphor for the apathy, political indifference and fatalism of modern Russian society.”¹⁶

Therefore the connection with Viennese Actionists¹⁷ seems to be quite natural. The pattern the

¹⁶ Marc Bennetts, *Acts of Resistance: Pyotr Pavlensky on performance art as protest*, <http://calvertjournal.com/articles/show/3373/pavlensky-performace-art-protest> 25-1-2015.

¹⁷ Viennese Actionism is a XXth century movement most active in the 60's and 70's. The core of the actions always layed in the tension between the performers and the audience. the artists were known for their explicit artistic nature – using blood, mutilating themselves, being cruel or referencing to cruelty.

artist acts falls into the same category. With Viennese Actionists, “the human body becomes established as an integral part of the art-making, art-action process: blood, sweat and excrement included. The combination of grotesque sexual humor and catharsis in their performances testified to the shocking nature of the works made by action artists.”¹⁸ Furthermore, Viennese Actionist art has a strong political notion to it. As Günter Brus and Otto Mühl wrote: “Art” is not art. “Art” is politics that has created new styles of communication.”¹⁹ And in Piotr Pavlensky's case politics comes first. Literally.

For Pavlensky, art stands as a tool to carry the message. The message conveys an oppressed, ignorant, obedient society, which is trained to be so. Piotr Pavlensky says “there's no greater evil than law-abiding citizens.”²⁰ He seems to be willing to do almost anything to get attention. Attention as

¹⁸ Petra Power, *Viennese Actionism: Between Experiment and Destruction*, <http://theculturetrip.com/europe/austria/articles/viennese-actionism-between-experiment-and-destruction> 26-1-2015.

¹⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Viennese_Actionism#cite_ref-Malcolm_Green_2-1 25-1-2015.

²⁰ Piotr Pavlensky, in: Dmitry Volchek, *Self-Mutilating Russian Artist Says 'There's No Greater Evil Than Law-Abiding Citicens'* <http://www.rferl.org/content/russia-pyotr-pavlensky-interview-protest-earlobe/26663128.html> 25-1-2015.

from Latin *attendere* – be present at the situation. He just needs an audience; and it could be anyone – authorities, or onlookers. Pavlensky believes the fleeting glimpse of the violence he showcases can actually trigger a change, or at least initiate thoughts about change. Or just the thought. A thought.

3. abject

As it can be seen by now, the oeuvre of both artists is rather complicated and versatile but to delve deeper, I want to touch upon Julia Kristeva's theory of an abject.

The theory of an abject was formed and discussed in her book *Powers of Horror: an Essay on Abjection*²¹ in 1980. Since then her views have been widely applied, discussed and carved deep into the discourse of the contemporary art theory and philosophy. In a nutshell, abject is something between subject and object. Something that once belonged to the subject and has strong references to it but doesn't belong to it anymore (e.g. body fluids) or is not a subject anymore (e.g. a corpse, an amputated limb). As it has very strong familiarity but alienation at the same time it creates unpleasant feelings, disgust and repulsion.

In my opinion it could be fruitful to apply the theory's framework to the thinking about society and its structure. If we imagine the society as a body, the different parts of it, that are not fully

²¹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: an essay on Abjection*, Columbia University Press, New York, USA, 1982 (written in French in 1980, translated into English in 1982 by Leon S. Roudiez.

integrated or rejected, can be considered to be an abject to it. Therefore, the Other, the madman and, without exception, the weirdo could be considered to be an abject of society; pushed into the margins and talked about in the same terms as Kristeva's abject. Something that once belonged to the subject/society and has strong references to it but doesn't belong to it anymore (e.g. body fluids/outcast communities) or is not a subject/society anymore (e.g. a corpse, an amputated limb/mad people, prisoners).

In my opinion Paul McCarthy and Piotr Pavlensky similarly operate within the field of both approaches towards abjection.

The reference towards body fluids and disgust it creates is rather obvious. Piotr Pavlensky bled, he sliced off his earlobe and literally abjected it from his body. ("I've no idea what happened to my earlobe after I severed it. The birds probably ate it."²²)

On the other hand, Paul McCarthy's case is more vague. Even though Paul McCarthy is also associated with Viennese Actionists, faking or imitating

²² Marc Bennetts, *Acts of Resistance: Pyotr Pavlensky on performance art as protest*, <http://calvertjournal.com/articles/show/3373/pavlensky-performance-art-protest> 25-1-2015.

part is rather important. Paul McCarthy was never plunged into bloody guts of animals for example, as Herman Nitsch was²³. Or he never smeared himself with feces or masturbated as Günther Brus did²⁴. The copious amounts of cheap ketchup, sausages and mayonnaise did just fine. I would also like to stress the ability to recognize ketchup as ketchup but still quickly link it and react towards it as one would react to blood is rather crucial in McCarthy's work.

But the artists are not just references to an abject - they stand as figures or as characters who are abjected from the society. They stand as the consciously constructed others. They fake the weirdo to induce the real feeling of uneasiness and uncanny.

²³ *Orgien Mysterian Theater* (which roughly translates as *Theatre of Orgies and Mysteries* or *The Orgiastic Mystery Theater*) or as he called it *Aktion*, staging nearly 100 performances between 1962 and 1998.

²⁴ *Kunst und revolution* event at the University of Vienna in 1968.

4. uncanny of the weirdo

As I have already mentioned in the introduction the theory of the uncanny stands as a strong reference and theoretical background for talking and analyzing the oeuvre of Paul McCarthy and Piotr Pavlensky. Not just because they obviously try to evoke certain unpleasant feelings, which are based not just on the physical, but also on psychological discomfort (or a combination both). Through physicality/corporeality of the actions they aim to trigger a psychological reaction.

Watching Paul McCarthy slam his large, fake hands in *the Painter* (1995) I couldn't stop frowning with every hit of the chopper. It was not just about unpleasant feeling of seeing someone mutilate themselves (not even truly doing it in this case) or project the pain those hits would induce on real flesh. More unpleasant was the feeling of seeing a grown man punishing himself, whining, mumbling and crying. There was something horrid about seeing him weak and overreacting. Knowing the act but also knowing the feeling of frustration and disappointment one can feel. I can feel. It was not just about seeing *the Other* - it was about recognizing *the Other* in myself. It was about not wanting to see, but still not being able to turn away. It was about the uncanny feeling of

witnessing something I was not planning to witness.



Paul McCarthy, *The Painter*, 1995.

Slavoj Žižek follows the Freudian notion of the uncanny. In the movie *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema* (2006)²⁵ he talks about uncanny things in relation to hiding and revealing. As an example he uses a scene from Francis Ford Copolla's movie *The Conversation* (1974)²⁶ where the protagonist suspects a murder, therefore sneaks into the bathroom for further investigation. As he is about to leave, he flushes the toilet but instead of water disappearing red blood appears, revealing and witnessing the murder. Žižek comments that when we flush, everything disappears into "netherworld, another reality, chaotic primordial reality, and the ultimate horror, of course, is when the flushing doesn't work, if the object returns [...] from that dimension"²⁷. The ultimate horror is to see something that was supposed to stay hidden²⁸. And it doesn't matter if it is evidence of a crime, or if feelings surface, or a madman. And sometimes it doesn't even matter

²⁵ *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema*, director Sophie Fiennes, Mischief Films and Amoeba Film, UK, Austria and the Netherlands, 2006.

²⁶ *The Conversation*, director Francis Ford Copolla, Paramount Pictures, USA, 1974.

²⁷ *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema*, director Sophie Fiennes, Mischief Films and Amoeba Film, UK, Austria and the Netherlands, 2006.

²⁸ That is the core of Shelling's understanding what uncanny is: "something that should have remained hidden that has come into the open." Umberto Eco, *Uncanny*, in: Umberto Eco, *On Ugliness*, Rizzoli, 2011, page 311.

if it is real or fake.



Francis Ford Copolla, *The Conversation*, 1974.

In addition, Žižek touches upon a slightly different approach to the uncanny. It stems from the idea that a person is not totally in control of his/her psyche. We feel uncanny because even though we repress certain things by pushing them to the back of our subconscious, they come forward in our consciousness despite our needs or wishes. The idea that we cannot control even ourselves creates a fearful situation. We become aliens to ourselves, or we mirror the ones we see.

It seems that there is an uncontrollable tension and eeriness when people encounter the unknown. And as the other or the weirdo falls into this

category the feeling induced seems to be rather similar. After one of Piotr Pavlensky's actions he said: "They [policemen] didn't know how to act because I wasn't doing anything, I wasn't threatening them in any way, but they were scared. They were scared of a defenseless man without clothes, although they were all armed and had bullet-proof vests."²⁹ Encountering somebody who doesn't act in the set framework or in a predictable manner is unnerving and frightful. The mechanisms we have learned to act in such cases do not apply, but new ones are not set yet. Therefore, there is always a blank gap between an encounter and an reaction. Sometimes it lasts a split second, and other times it seemingly takes forever.

Steven Schneider in his article *Monsters as (Uncanny) Metaphors: Freud, Lakoff and the Representation of Monstrosity in Cinematic Horror*³⁰ touches upon the psychological effects of the opposition monster vs. normal:

²⁹ Dmitry Volchek, *Self-Mutilating Russian Artist Says 'There's No Greater Evil Than Law-Abiding Citizens'* <http://www.rferl.org/content/russia-pyotr-pavlensky-interview-protest-earlobe/26663128.html> 25-1-2015.

³⁰ Steven Schneider, "Monsters as (Uncanny) Metaphors: Freud, Lakoff, and the Representation of Monstrosity in Cinematic Horror", *Other Voices*, volume 1, number 3, January, 1999, <http://www.othervoices.org/1.3/sschneider/monsters.php> 12-12-2014.

"...monster is the reification, the embodiment in a symbol, of the unconscious content in the mind [...] the monster is an embodiment of a certain cultural moment - of a time, a feeling, and a place."³¹ "According to Carroll, "monsters are not only physically threatening; they are cognitively threatening. They are threats to common knowledge. ...monsters are in a certain sense challenges to the foundations of culture's way of thinking."³²

I believe the monster or monstrous figure does not have to occur per se as a monster. The monstrous qualities can be cast upon certain group of people in society (usually the ones that are outcasts, ill-looking upon, or carry a certain negative prejudice), or on things one doesn't understand. If my poor grandmother were religious she would probably make a Sign of the Cross repeatedly after seeing one of the live actions by Paul McCarthy or Piotr Pavlensky.

³¹ *ibid.*

³² *ibid.*

conclusions

In conclusion, the opposition between normality and madness is rather crucial for a society to shape and determine itself. By clearly identifying what is "normal", "not-normal" is also defined, and vice-versa. The idea was brought up and discussed in depth by Michel Foucault's writings. However, this idea can lead to better understanding and appreciation of small deviations that do exist in everyday society. The figure of the weirdo plays an important role in society as well. Society essentially needs the figure of the weirdo to be able to accept the broader spectrum of personalities, as well as the ability to reflect upon itself and set the parameters of the framework in which it functions.

Art is pioneering the detection, absorption and mirroring of these deviations back to the viewer. Case studies of works by Paul McCarthy and Piotr Pavlensky show the spectrum of their artistic approaches, and public reactions they can induce. Furthermore, it is important to note that the reaction is strongly connected to the context and the audience it addresses.

Paul McCarthy obviously moves acutely in the art field context therefore, it is undoubtedly treated

as art. His goal is to shake up or bring up inner drives that people oppress as darker, undesirable ones. As he exposes and acts from them it mostly creates tension and uncanny feelings within the audience.

Piotr Pavlensky's audience is not so obviously art related. As he performs his actions in public spaces the audience he receives is usually rather accidental. Therefore, most of the time he is not considered to be an artist, but is approached as crazy or insane, a mad person who requires attention from authorities. And he gets it every time.

On the other hand, even though both artists use different means, the objective seems to be the same. Both artists consciously balance their works between "normality" and "insanity", expressing deep, repressed, inner feelings, which create tension between artist and audience. They stand as the consciously constructed other. They fake *the weirdo* to induce the real feelings of uneasiness and the uncanny.

We can ignore it, criticize it, compliment it, or even praise it, but the reaction itself is the true purpose of the art. Any kind of reaction is crucial for these kinds of works, because everything stems from us, and goes back to us.

*We must be out of our minds.
We're as mad as hell.*

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so weird!
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dovilė aleksandravičiūtė
Gerrit Rietveld Academie
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