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MIKE KELLEY



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TONY OURSLER

WE MET AT THE SUPER SHOP, the wood and metal shop at CalArts. He was a smallish guy with slicked-back hair and skin that looked like it had plagued him since adolescence. It was his soft eyes, though, that contradicted the overall tough-guy look of khaki pants, 'Nam-vet boots, and ragged T-shirt, the cutoff sleeves revealing his skinny arms. I'd seen the guy puttering around, making some kind of strange boxes, but it was the image on his T-shirt that struck me: a freaky, drooling caricature from the Basil Wolverton-inspired Odd Rods series. This was an unmistakable icon from my pre-adolescent days. I loved those bubble-gum cards: The Odd Rods were an alternative to baseball cards for kids who were into custom cars and hot rods. They were cheaply printed and bore images of demented, pockmarked, scrotumlike characters who emerged from smoking muscle cars with phallic stick shifts, leaking saliva, motor oil, and general effluvia in equal amounts. To me, these images are renderings of the brain of a male adolescent, out of control, under the influence of hormones. They were the first of many things over which Mike and I bonded.

Shortly after we met, Mike asked me whether I wanted to start a band. He had seen a few of my tapes (I had just recently put down the brush and picked up a video camera to make a series of black-and-white reel-to-reel videos with titles such as *Joe*, *Joe's Transsexual Brother* and *Joe's Woman* [1976]) and he liked the way I used my voice. We discussed the fact that he'd had a band in Michigan, Destroy All Monsters, with his friend Jim Shaw. The rest is history, as they say, and we began the frustrating and fruitful project known as the Poetics.

First, let me give a little context to CalArts circa 1975. The school is nestled in lovely grass-covered hills just next to Interstate 5, some thirty minutes north of Los Angeles. There was nothing in the area except encroaching cookie-cutter suburban homes that spread like mushrooms along blacktop ribbons. The hills burned, and at night it was like living in a Bosch painting with nowhere to go. Misfits from all over the place gathered there to study music, film, dance, and art. Among them were Jim Casebere, Christopher Williams, Dorit Cypis, Ericka Beckman, Sue Williams, Jonathan Lasker, Ashley Bickerton, Stephen Prina, Bill Wurtz, Jim Shaw, and John Miller. Teachers included Judy Pfaff, John Baldessari, David Askevold, Douglas Huebler, Jonathan Borofsky, and Michael Asher. John Cage was in residence. The swimming pool was nude. Alain Robbe-Grillet came to speak. And Mike was building strange birdhouses down in the Super Shop.

These beautifully made wooden structures seemed perfect, yet on closer inspection they were completely wrong; the entrance holes were too small or in the wrong place. They were designed to trick and confuse the birds. This was my first encounter with Mike's work. In retrospect, the birdhouses were signature Mike: First we are struck by an anarchic and often biting humor, which unfolds to reveal a deeply mysterious yet considered logic, which then evaporates back into our world, leaving us to ponder our predicament.

In LA, Mike discovered swap meets and music, and scouring the two scenes became habitual for him. I'm sure that his weekend ritual of walking enormous fields of all kinds of cultural detritus for sale delighted him and sparked his mind. I remember talking about how much he liked the way the sellers arranged their disparate goods, laying out marvelous juxtapositions of fluorescent buckets, toys, wigs, electronics, and clothes organized by color or texture. The swap meet became our art-supply store. Later, I would feel echoes of those days in the formal structure of Mike's moving and fragile stuffed-animal pieces.

Mike had heard of a band called the Screamers, and we went to see them a number of times at the Whisky a Go Go, because Mike thought that the singer was doing something new—a hybrid between performance and music. We found all the small clubs and saw X, Human Hands, and Circle Jerks, and we paid \$1.50 to be in a Devo video. One of our favorite haunts was Los Burlesqueto, an all-Hispanic transvestite club featuring a surreal and glamorous lineup of singers with names like the Real Donna Summers. Punk music was actually dangerous in those days; we were once clubbed by riot police at a show that was being shut down. We knew about Tony Conrad's music and films, and somehow he appeared on our doorstep in Hollywood; within a few days we were dressed as sad-sack enlisted men in a field along a godforsaken freeway, shooting a few scenes for Tony's movie *Hail the Fallen I* (1981).

Music, for Mike, was a way of exploring ideas about performance, collaboration, and friendship, and the Poetics were no exception. The first iteration of the Poetics was a threesome with Don Krieger. We were not much more than a sketch of a group with a small organ, a drum box, and an Echoplex. Around 1977, we began various projects such as a radio show, a sound track, and a janitor-gone-Bauhaus-style dance piece involving mop poles, titled *The Pole Dance*. Mike had a pile of squeeze toys and plenty of whoopee cushions that were put to good use, making liquid, gaseous sounds while submerged in buckets of water. And Mike was a drummer, so there were always percussive materials about, ranging from a



Above: Members of The Poetics, Los Angeles, 1977. Photo: Jim Shaw. From left: John Arnheim, Bill Stobaugh, Mike Kelley, Tony Oursler, John Miller.

Below: Mike Kelley, *Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstruction (Singles Mixer) #8*, 2005, two parts, one found black-and-white and one color photograph, each 30 x 25".



classic drum set to faux-rubber Indian toy drums. I kept a notebook of the brainstorming sessions, replete with pasted-in lyrics and schematics that we passed around. Twenty years later, we mined the notebook to realize some of the unfinished plans we had, which led to the *Poetics Project* installations.

Jim Shaw, Mike's Destroy All Monsters bandmate and best friend, had migrated west with him. Jim occasionally sat in on guitar for the Poetics, and I think we had some of our first rehearsals in his studio. In those days, I associated Jim with the toxic smell of latex and airbrush. Jim and Mike were always casting udders or monsters or entrails, objects that emerged from the filth and detritus unique to art schools. Jim was the most amazing guitarist, who often played the electric with a knife rather than a pick and worked with tape effects in ways that would be radical even today. Mike was passionate about the drums and he seemed transported by the cacophony he could produce with them. While playing, he would go into a rapturous state, assigning meanings to the beats: military, polka, heavy acid, disco, garage, thunder, Indian, hippie. Out of these sessions came songs as well as invented characters. One persona that stood out was the Dream Lover, who was always accompanied by an up-tempo beat and a cowbell. The Dream Lover danced around like an idiot onstage, smelling flowers and laughing a low, submoronic laugh, like a cartoon character just before the anvil drops on its head. I remember Mike playing the Dream Lover beat and laughing hysterically. A host of other characters followed: Crazy Head (half man and half woman), the Vein Fucker, the Boneless Sack of Flesh, Heathens in Limbo, the Comedian (some kind of failed Rat Pack guy who told nonsensical jokes), the Crowd Pleaser (everyone enjoys an enormous penis).

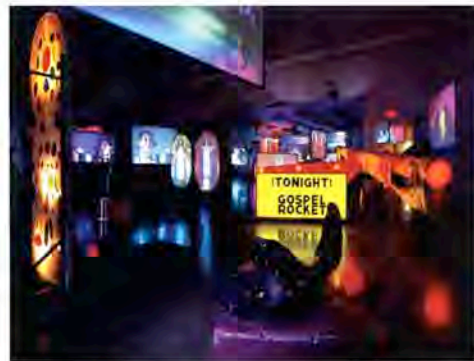
Crossover was in the air in those days. At CalArts, Mike and I took a performance class with Laurie Anderson, who at that point had pretty much given up on performance art and was focusing on music. Performance artist Julia Heyward was talking about visual records—a fusion of film and music—long before MTV. Dan Graham came to speak and blew me away. Mike was also there with his friend Kim Gordon, who would go on to alchemically alter music and art. The idea that art could pass into the realm of pop culture had great appeal to Mike and me. Somehow, a side effect of studying conceptual art was that we came to believe that there could be new ways of making movies and TV shows as well as theater. The Poetics really operated as a think tank for performative ideas, but also as a kind of male bonding. The band morphed as various members came and went, with Mike on drums and me singing, mostly, and we eventually played a few gigs here and there, famously emptying the room.

POP ART HAD POINTED US in this direction, but we were determined to go further, lower, and harder. In the mid-'70s, Mike was emerging from the spell of the Detroit scene: the Hairy Who, Blue Cheer, Iggy Pop, R. Crumb. I watched Mike destroy piles of old drawings in his studio at CalArts, and it was part of his process of reformation and self-mythologizing, double takes on his past. A kind of looping back and regurgitation ran through his work right to the end. I can't help but think that watching him sift through the Jim Nutt-like images from his Ann Arbor days was an early step in this process. Many of the drawings that were saved from the trash that day were painted over in the late '80s and re-presented. Mike was obsessed with keeping certain histories alive while rewriting and creating others.

The Poetics Project, our large-scale collaborative work from the late '90s, was a reworking, reexamination, and continuation of many of the projects we started in the '70s. We remastered the old music and made a new CD, *Critical Inquiry in Green*. We fleshed out and videotaped *The Pole Dance* with choreographer Anita Pace. Building half of the installation in Los Angeles and half in New York, we accrued a giant snowball of material. We created new forms by combining installation elements designed in the '70s. We invited key figures from that time to populate our art via video projection: Alan Vega, Arto Lindsay, David Byrne, and Laurie Anderson, to name a few. Mike understood that history is possessed by those who write it, and he was determined to harness that power. All artists drag their pasts into the future, consciously or not, but Mike's brilliance lay in his ability to amplify the strong ideas so they resonated, shedding new light on the past and suggesting unexpected paths forward. Versions of *The Poetics Project* traveled to New York, Barcelona, Kassel, London, Paris, and Tokyo. In Japan, we fulfilled a lifelong dream of seeing Kabuki theater, and Mike laughed so much he cried when watching a particularly lewd seduction scene between an octopus and a sailor. In Paris, we rang in the millennium in an ecstatic, drunken mass of people on the Place de la Concorde. Mike ignored the light show, instead fixating on kicking an empty wine bottle across the paving stones, transported by the crazy sounds it made. By the time we installed the project at Metro Pictures in New York, four of the Poetics had been represented by the gallery for many years. *The Poetics Project* was hailed by the *New York Times* as the "most irritating show in New York City." Mike loved that quote, and we laughed about it many times over the following years.

One image that was important to Mike and his work was psychologist Harry Harlow's famous research into maternally

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Above: View of "Mike Kelley: Day Is Done," 2005, Gagosian Gallery, New York.

Below: Mike Kelley with Sonic Youth, Molly Cleator, and Adam Rudolph, *Plato's Cave, Rothko's Chapel, Lincoln's Profile*, 1986. Performance view, Artists Space, New York, December 5, 1986. Mike Kelley and Molly Cleator. Photo: Paula Court.

In Mike's work, we are first struck by an anarchic and often biting humor, which unfolds to reveal a deeply mysterious yet considered logic.



deprived monkeys in the 1950s. The experiments involved charting the psychological effects of replacing a monkey's mother with milk-dispensing replicas made of either wire mesh or soft terry cloth. In the early '80s, a blowup of a baby monkey latching onto a crude replica of a mother hung high on the wall of Mike's studio, like an icon to aspire to formally, psychologically, and aesthetically.

In *Educational Complex*, 1995, Mike charted his own education by examining every space he'd attended during his education. The work linked architecture and suppressed memory with pop-cultural memes of abuse, which seemed inextricably woven into the self-analysis victim culture of America in the '90s. From talk shows to tabloid magazines, it seemed that everywhere lurked satanists, serial killers, abusive priests, Janus-faced violators of every form. In the same way, Mike's phenomenal *Day Is Done* project of 2005 can be read almost autobiographically, although I didn't realize it at the time. It was only when I viewed the single-channel videos a few years after the multimedia installation that I recognized some of the stories that undoubtedly came from his youth (the barber-shop sequence in particular). It's not important in any way that these works resemble actual events in Mike's life, but it is important that they were a sort of exorcism of what he saw as the banalities and falsehoods of constructed culture—whether it be the 4-H club, the church social, the high school play, the cheerleaders, the classical family unit, or monogamy. He rejected these social systems as means of repression, exclusion, and division.

This relentless deconstruction of his own personal history, of what Mike saw as the falsehoods around him, took its toll in an existential crisis that I believe led to his demise. I remember discussing the Viennese Actionists with Mike, and how they played with rituals similar to those with which we both had grown up in the Catholic Church. In fact, I think he took part in a Hermann Nitsch performance in Los Angeles in the '70s, an event I really wanted nothing to do with. One of our friends had a psychotic episode during the performance, which involved copious amounts of blood and animal entrails. Somehow it seemed to us that Nitsch was simply replacing one empty ritual with another. (As we would later learn, the failed Actionist commune that we had so admired sadly replaced one abuse for another.) The Irish Catholic upbringing Mike and I shared continually posed these questions and remained a strong bond between us. I always valued Catholicism for its magical thinking, if for nothing else. I remember discussing with Mike the value of being taught to believe in things that others didn't believe existed and that could never be proved, how it was somehow akin to artmaking. But in the end, Mike had a dark view of this process, seeing it as cold, empty, and, finally, meaningless. His religion was now art.

Not to say that Mike was humorless on the subject; he mined this history, for example, when producing his felt-banner series "Half a Man," 1987–1991. Throughout the next thirty years of our friendship, we continued this deeply funny exploration of Catholicism, including one

collaborative performance from 1983 at Beyond Baroque called X-C, as in "ex-Catholic." We both thought plaid was quite sexy. Of course, all the girls in Catholic school wore plaid skirts, resulting in a lampshadelike pleated prop. We titled this "Sex of Plaid," which had to be matched with "Sex of Tie," in reference to the phallic neckties that symbolically choked us in our youth in Catholic school. And as worked on the script, the black-and-white priest's collar became analogous to the gap-toothed mouth of a teenage girl gone bad, having become drug-addled and a member of a biker gang. We also constructed a "Bloody Tooth" and a "Bloody Nail." In X-C, much of the sound track was prerecorded and involved heavy layers of organ music, a kind of church music turned psychedelia. Naturally, the use of wine in transubstantiation worked its way into the performance, with gallons of cheap Gallo overflowing during the performance, covering the stage. We left it a bacchanal mess, and it was so late that we missed our appointment to clean the space the next morning—with disastrous results. An AA meeting was scheduled there early the next day. We both felt terrible because they had to hold their meeting in this room that stank of cheap wine.

WHILE I PREFERRED the eye of the camera, Mike preferred the frenetic anxiety of live performance, and he began to work on a string of performances with titles such as *My Space I*, 1978, *The Monitor and the Merrimac*, 1979, and *Parasite Lilly*, 1980. While the Poetics continued, we also helped one another with our separate projects. We were part of a loose group of young artists trying to get things done: John Miller, Jim Shaw, Mike, and I swapping cameras, instruments, books, music, lending a hand. Mike would perform in my tape *The Loner*, 1980, and I would be a stooge in his performances.

We both made props for our projects, and we thought of them as disposable—which gave them a certain freedom, as they were made simply and directly; we were surprised to find, in the process, that we had ended up making artworks, too. Mike's props were marvelously inventive, equal parts Bauhaus and county-fair science project. He would operate megaphones, cardboard tubes, tinfoil, speakers, which would later morph into his sculptures and drawings. In fact, many of his early exhibitions really came out of his performances—for example, our 1980 three-person exhibition with Mitchell Syrop at LACE, "By-Products." Or his first Metro Pictures show in New York in 1982, which included *Monkey Island* and *Confusion* and which marked the beginning of a long relationship with directors Helene Winer and Janelle Reiring. At Metro there was a mix of objects and images that were once animated by the magic of his performance and now held their own as drawings and paintings. Mike was a magnetic and captivating performer, and he generously shared this talent by acting in works by Ericka Beckman, Bruce and Norman Yonemoto, and others.

At the core of both of our projects was language. We were both interested in a kind of kaleidoscopic art form, wondering at all kinds of combinations of text, music,

performative actions, images, and sculpture that came almost out of nothing: Some plastic garbage bags, string, blocks of wood, a dime-store plant can, a cassette player, and a cardboard tube became an intricate system of oration performed by the sublime and dark Mike Kelley. A natural writer, Mike had studied literature as an undergraduate, and his poetic use of language was stunning when combined with his unique droning voice. He had a gift for understanding and transforming low or "base" materials, as he called them, and in his hands a bowl of mud would become a psychosexual volcanic landscape as he pressed a clean white cup into it while incanting, "Raise a rim around it," over and over. He yelled through long tubes, banged big drums while doing dances; he would quiet down and place a small paper flower on his chest, mesmerizing the audience as the flower pulsed to the beat of his heart. One of his first public invitations, "My Space" at the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art in 1978 (curated by Richard Armstrong), involved moving his head and measuring distances around a plant that was negatively affecting his thoughts. Finally, Mike attacked the plant and ripped off a few leaves, and a collective gasp of horror emanated from the audience. Mike thought that was the funniest thing—people believing that plants had feelings, a sign that hippie culture was still alive and well in Southern California, even though something else was happening: Mike was original punk.

Unfortunately, many of Mike's early performances are documented only in photo and script form, if at all. He refused to allow them to be filmed, stating that they should exist only in the moment. As far as I know, there are only two videos of these early pieces: *The Monitor and the Merrimac*, 1979, at Hallwalls in Buffalo, and *Plato's Cave, Rotbko's Chapel, Lincoln's Profile*, 1986, shot at Artists Space in New York, a phenomenal performance he backed musically in collaboration with Sonic Youth. I recently saw the Hallwalls video for the first time and was catapulted back in time to April 30, 1981. Before performing, Mike would hang out in a bathroom, pacing, revving up for the event, running through things in his head, hitting a small whiskey flask, and running cold water into the blocked sink. He would splash his face over and over until his T-shirt was soaked, pull his pants away from his belly and shovel icy water onto his genitals, and, for good measure, dunk his head into the sink with the alarming thud of bone bouncing off porcelain. Then he would slick his hair back and be ready to go, perfectly tuned, clearheaded and in the zone. The poetry would flow, drums would beat, Mike would stomp around with some black plastic sacks attached to his feet, hide in a tent, wear a dunce cap, and lie among some cones as a white cloth rose up and down above his crotch in syncopation with a dim bulb.

A few years later, in 1983, Mike made his first videotape, *Banana Man*, and I came out to Minnesota to watch and help. The following year Mike came back to Buffalo to perform in *Evol*, for which I had taken over an old TV studio in a rotting, abandoned Elks lodge. On the same trip we both performed in Tony Conrad's legendary

work in progress “The Jail Movie,” where we all play women in prison. And in 1993, we collaborated on *White Trash and Phobic*, an installation that pitted two droning, projected effigies of Mike and me in opposite corners of a darkened room. In a trance state, Mike describes everyday scenarios such as walking in an orchard; all of them end with the same claustrophobic outcome: “You can’t move, you’re stuck, you can’t breathe, you can’t get out.”

Later, Mike’s “Kandors” series, 1999–, fixated on his obsession with the comic books of his youth. Mike insisted on going deeper and deeper into the minutiae of Superman to an absurd degree, drawing the lonely allegory of Kandor, Superman’s lost home, which had been depicted differently by numerous comic artists through the years. I can’t help but see this as the existential endgame for Mike, after he had decimated his own history and much of American culture. He was now looking at the home he could never return to, producing haunting replicas, glowing multicolored towers that were lacking in detail due to the great distances, psychological and otherwise, involved. Again I had the feeling that Mike was digging deeply into his past, but this time the results

were disturbingly sealed in a bell jar. One of his final projects, *Mobile Homestead*, 2010–, is a sweeping public work based on a disquieting image of the artist’s childhood home—freshly painted white, conspicuously empty, uprooted, mounted on wheels, and aimlessly hauled around Detroit by a big rig. Mike described the video that he was producing for the house and some of the plans to use the house as a creative catalyst in Detroit. He was excited about the video and how it explored the streets and shops of his beloved native city; he was fascinated by how the city lived on after the economic meltdown. It’s a portrait of eccentric survivors, stubbornly rebuilding after the deconstruction of an American dream, and I wonder whether Mike was looking for a way forward in this work. He would revel in our confusion.

While writing this piece, I leafed through the Poetics notebook and found the following poem:

Hey, I’m Mr. Poetic
 A worker in aesthetics
 I work to make the mundane mysterious
 I work to make the unimportant serious

TONY OURSLER IS AN ARTIST BASED IN NEW YORK.

Caption acknowledgements

Page 75: Giorgio Morandi, *Natura Morta* (Still Life), 1941. © Giorgio Morandi/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SIAE, Rome. **Pages 90:** Photograph taken by Forrest Bess of his self-surgery, ca. 1958. Collection of the Betty Parsons Gallery Records and Personal Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. **Page 91:** Forrest Bess with his work, Chiquapin, TX, ca. 1960. Collection of the Betty Parsons Gallery Records and Personal Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. **Page 161:** Tom Wesselman, *Bedroom Painting No. 38*, 1978. © Estate of Tom Wesselman/SODRAC, Montreal/VAGA, New York. **Page 162:** Laurent Grasso, *Les Oiseaux* (The Birds), 2008. © Laurent Grasso/ADAGP, Paris; Eugen Batz, *The spatial effect of colors and forms*, 1929, Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. **Page 166:** Gerrit Rietveld, Rietveld-Schröder House, 1924, © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. **Page 169:** Model of the Haus der Kunst in the pageant “Great Events in German History,” Ludwigstraße, Munich, 1933. © Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte. **Page 240:** Mike Kelley, *Kandors Full Set*, 2005–2009, From *Mike Kelley: Kandors*, ed. Rafael Jablonka (Jablonka Galerie/Hirmer Verlag, 2010). **Page 252:** Werner Schroeter, *Salome*, 1971; *Der Rosenkoing* (The Rose King), 1986. © Filmmuseum München. **Page 255:** Werner Schroeter, *Neurasia*, 1968; *Argula*, 1968. © Filmmuseum München. **Page 256:** Werner Schroeter, *Eika Katappa*, 1969. © Filmmuseum München. **Page 257:** Werner Schroeter, *Der Bomberpilot*, 1970; *Willow Springs*, 1973. © Filmmuseum München. **Page 259:** Werner Schroeter, *Palermo oder Wolfsburg* (Palermo or Wolfsburg), 1980. © Filmgalerie 451; Werner Schroeter, *Der lachende Stern* (The Smiling Star), 1983. © Filmmuseum München. **Page 272:** Page from Forrest Bess’s notebooks, included in an undated letter from Bess to art historian Meyer Schapiro. Collection of the Betty Parsons Gallery Records and Personal Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. **Page 299:** Thomas Struth, *The Queen and Prince Philip, The Duke of Edinburgh*, 2011. Commissioned by the National Portrait Gallery, London.