bump up against – or fall into a circuit with – an "outsider" artist such as Scott or someone from an entirely other time-space. One wall running along the staircase leading to the fourth floor contained several monitors showing the remarkable 1912 films of Wladyslaw Starewicz that use beetle carcasses to enact familiar early film melodramas on a new scale. Thus Starewicz – like two other artists in the show, Salvador Dalí (not included in New York but on view when the exhibition was presented in Madrid's Reina Sofía) and Ruth Francken – shared Trockel's apparent belief that melodrama and scale need to be thought in relation to one another. Thanks to these disparate planets that now catch Trockel in their orbits, we can understand her interest in scale according to the psychosexual manias they make explicit. A new postwar Surrealist thread emerges, altogether extinguished in Joseph Beuys's and Georg Baselitz's heroicizing – or even the hermaphroditic figuration of Louise Bourgeois. If it seems most sympathetic to the oversized scale of Annette Messager's collections and weavings, even such a "canonical" relation becomes, in the Trockel/Cooke version, less academic, loosened into another sense of history altogether.

On the museum's second floor is where we found Trockel's more "private" works, something like a collection of her favorite prints as well as companions made by a host of artists who are likely to be first-time discoveries for almost all audiences: Günter Weseler, Leopold and Rudolf Blaschka, Mary Delany, Maria Sibylla Merian, Manuel Montalvo, José Celestino Mutis. Those who are perhaps familiar – James Castle, John James Audubon, Morton Bartlett, and the aforementioned Dalí and Francken – are only marginally more so: We might know their names or importance or even their work, but that doesn't mean we have understood their work as contemporary art (only in Castle's case can one unequivocally say that this has taken place – thanks again to efforts by Cooke and others[1]). Here the professionalism of art is subdivided, with model-making and illustration sharing space and overlapping with obsessive taxonomies. We begin to see, perhaps, a world in which categories (of the Blaschkas' jellyfishes, of the pitchers and wine glasses, parrots, and phone numbers of Montalvo's handmade notebooks, of Merian's insects and Bartlett's ballerinas) generate ideas about what art can be and vice versa. But more powerfully, art in "Rosemarie Trockel: A Cosmos" is tasked with generating new thought about categories – thought located in both labor and its apparent others (domesticity, natural life). In so doing, art becomes a stake without precise definition. There may be no better use for the monographic format than its auto-destruction, but if there's going to be a bonfire, let it look like this.

RACHEL HAIDU

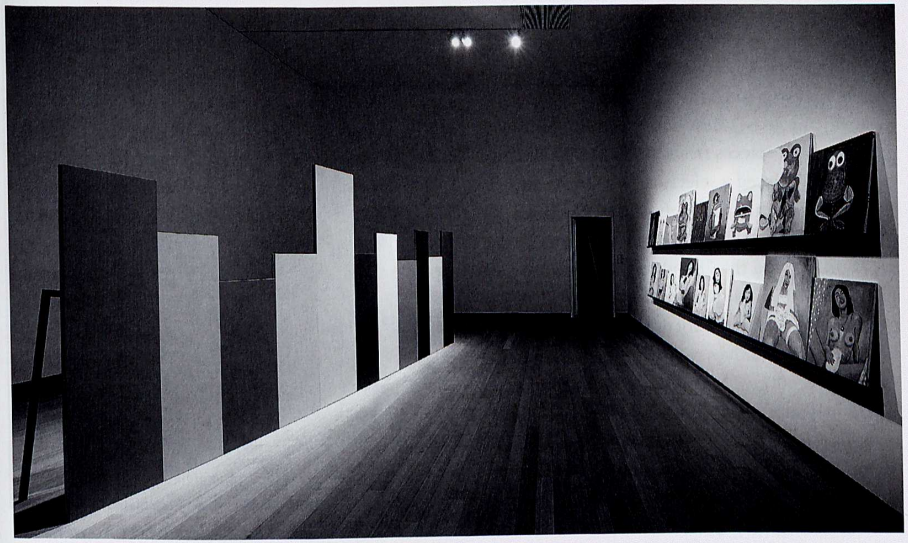
"Rosemarie Trockel: A Cosmos", New Museum, New York, October 24, 2012–January 20, 2013.

Note

1 "James Castle: Show and Store" (Reina Sofia, May 18–September 2011) was also curated by Cooke.

AMERICAN IDOL

On Mike Kelley at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam



"Mike Kelley", Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 2013, exhibition view

The retrospective exhibition "Mike Kelley", which will soon depart on a tour of major museum institutions around the world, begs reflection on the status of Kelley's work in relation to cultural value.

Over the 35 years of his practice, which penetrated cultural forms and norms – increasingly looking outward to culture at large and treating it like the product of society's libidinal desires – Kelley raced against his work's impending fate: For all his subversion of high art (and Modernism), by forcing it into an imperfect union with the crude and the countercultural, that dialectic was bound to turn back on itself. Just as he viewed these various provinces as one landscape, so too would his work ultimately be integrated into a broader historical trajectory leading from his cultural adolescence to the influence he would leave in his wake.

Whether it's because Mike Kelley's death looms over this exhibition's evolution or because logistic and conceptual immunity is perversely built into the work itself, the constituents of "Mike Kelley" make for impractical material to accommodate a museum retrospective; a canonization of the highest order. And thankfully so, perhaps. This show, curated by Ann Goldstein, nevertheless delivered on the undoubtedly taxing task of presenting the public with an exhaustive profile of more than 30 years of work. Taking over the Stedelijk's brand-new multilevel expansion, the exhibition did not halt before the escalator ride, accompanied as it was by a track from Kelley's former band Destroy All Monsters, proving that yesteryear's protopunk noise can be today's institutional Muzak.

The format chosen to offer a reading of this profuse – thus necessarily incomplete – œuvre was fail-safe chronology. The lower level contained works up until the early 2000s, including probably the artist's best-known ones: Plush-toy and handicraft pieces from the early 1990s. The upper level housed a selection of works from Kelley's large-scale and high-end production projects of the last decade, namely "Day is Done" (2004–2006) and the "Kandors" (1999–2012). Although a chronological arrangement fortifies the orthodoxy of contextualizing works first as biography, alternatives to it would have to tackle the aforementioned immunity of Kelley's work, which is retained both by the artist's tight grip over the work's interpretation through his exacting writing as well as by the literally irrepresentable nature of his many multicomponent works.

"Exploring" (1985), a black-and-white painting originally included in the artist's exhibition "Plato's Cave, Rothko's Chapel, Lincoln's Profile" at Metro Pictures, could serve as a primer on Kelley's parsing of rather existential themes – such as desires for recognition, libidinal gratification, and transcendence – which he renegotiated outside their expected sophisticated milieus and respective formal conventions. Fusing image and text in a graphic style typical of the artist's works from the 1980s, "Exploring" gives the following directives: "When spelunking sometimes you have to stoop [...] Sometimes you have to go on all fours. Sometimes even crawl." The work thus conjures the very primal scene Sigmund Freud considered fundamental to an entire civilization's certain discontent: "The fateful process of civilization would have thus set in with man's adoption of an erect posture. [...] [This] made his genitals, which were previously concealed, visible and in need of protection, and so provoked feelings of shame in him."[1] Against this backdrop, Kelley's reference to spelunking, an outdoorsy geek's niche interest, toys with promises of obliviousness to "shame" – perhaps even inviting a fantastic, primordial sort of bliss. The proposition that aspirations of self-fulfillment could be distinguished not only in the ideational pursuit of higher aesthetics, but also in various vernaculars and "extracurricular" recesses of the social is but one key aspect of Kelley's reappraisal of aesthetics as they relate to cultural history.

In fact, cultural history materialized in the artist's meticulous archival field work, like the high-school yearbook and local newspaper segments he collated under the title "The Local Cultural Pictorial Guide 1968–1972, Wayne Westland Eagle" – displayed in the vertical drawers of showcases on wheels suggestive of no-nonsense institutional storage (these components form part of the work "John Glenn Memorial Detroit River Reclamation Project", 2001). The characters and activities documented in the displays include environmental teach-ins; hula dancers "Gone Hawaiian"; budding ventriloquists and clowns; May Crowning courts; and the "King's Army", a lineup of crooks claiming to receive "Miracles Satan Cannot Deny".

Kelley unearthed a "Spiritual America" all over the place that destabilized Richard Prince's stylishly cropped taxonomy of cool cowboys, hot biker babes, and sexy waterfalls. Kelley also drew from his archive to find the archetypes he introduced into the cast of characters in "Day is Done", parts of which were shown in this exhibition, including "EAPR #9 Farm Girl" (2004–05).[2] That video features a lusty dungaree-clad bumpkin maid rapping and yodeling. It effectively imaged

Mike Kelley, part of the series „Kandors", 1999–2012

Kelley's critique of popular culture as, first and foremost, exactly that: People's cultures, which, before being dismissed as falsely proletarian (not to mention petit bourgeois) through a disgusted pronunciation of "culture industry", could actually be traced back to preindustrial pastimes – to a folk genre such as yodeling. "EAPR #9 Farm Girl" cleverly combines yodeling with the syncopated, climactic breathiness characteristic of pop/R&B group Destiny's Child, allowing the latter to serve as a musical analogy updating the folk genre – and casting each as forms of cultural "orgasms."[3] And who's to say if either's faking it after all?

Kelley tapped into and exhausted pop culture's capacity to mythologize folkloric themes in real time as well as its escapist promise in order to structure the filmic performances of "Day is Done" and the related group of photographs titled "Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstruction". These photo diptychs juxtapose black-and-white images of high school extracurricular activities with glossy color photos depicting actors hired by Kelley to restage them, revamping the archetypes of teenage suburbia and fulfilling a teenage desire to emulate one's idols – the stuff that has since hypertrophied into an industry of spectacularly boring identificatory narcissism in the form of "American Idol" and other programs like it.

Significantly, finalists on "American Idol" must rise from the wallow of schlumpy footage exploiting the humiliation of contestants who are methodically screened for their inadequacy vis-à-vis specific ideas of talent and beauty. This serves as a perfect analogy for Kelley's humorously retributive approach: Not only do most of the characters in "Day is Done" mirror these contestants; they're also deployed as formal agents throughout much of Kelley's work – as in "Missing Time Color Exercise #2" (1998). Here, monochromatic panels were sized according to the dimensions of Kelley's treasured hick comic magazine *Sex To Sexty*, whose issues carried raunchy titles in the form of puns, including "Snow Job" (picturing Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs) and "Dry Hump" (a Bedouin riding of a pair of copulating camels). Kelley displayed these panels and a selection of the comics in a forced marriage laid out as a colorful grid, framed, and hung on the wall. Thus "*Sex to Sexty* and its base aesthetics stipulate the work's formal parameters, which simultaneously align with modernist conceptions of flatness and opticality as well as rigorous conceptual geometry.

This old-school dialectical clash returned a decade later in "Horizontal Tracking Shot of a Cross Section of Trauma Rooms" (2009). Here, conveyor belt-like animated video sequences of solid color bars fitfully burst open into crude, split-second YouTube videos of boys being hazed and pranked – "push[ed]-and-pull[ed]," to appropriate the language of the Abstract Expressionist painter Hans Hofmann (the painter figures into Kelley's work from the 1990s as a notorious target of oedipal scorn due to the imprint he left on Kelley, who was trained in art school by a student of Hofmann's).

Kelley's (mis)appropriations of modernist tropes, which have now attained a mythical status among succeeding generations, serve as more than art-historical modifications. They pose as forms of therapeutic correctives à la Freud's "System Unconscious"[4] aimed at modernism's unambiguous – in Kelley's reading, repressed – formalist autonomy. These correctives went back further, and "beyond" art, in the "Reconstructive History Series" (1989), involving iconic images found in American history schoolbooks that Kelley amended with rude doodling. If Cy Twombly had garnered Rosalind Krauss's attention for scribbling a pallid "Fuck Olympia" in his painting "Olympia" (1957) as an affront to Édouard Manet, the father of modern art, Kelley upped the ante with juvenile delinquencies towards America's founding fathers. Thus, for all the loaded phraseology of "abject," "transgression," and "bad-boy" frequently pinned to his work, Kelley is above all a stickler for equilibrium, for balancing the books; a star pupil, a good boy.

Kelley's triumph, as evidenced by this retrospective, is of a formal nature; he deftly engaged the idioms and aesthetics of culture's adolescence and its fringes without sparing these new entries any of the scrutiny to which he subjected modern art. His research-heavy methodology – yet non-bookish implementation – precedes "artistic research" as a notion that has since become a specialized field, as opposed to something a contemporary artist does daily. Kelley's avid trawling of yard sales and obscure pulp (including but certainly not limited to *Sex To Sexty*) marks a contemporary moment of a socio-technological "change" like the one observed by Walter Benjamin at the dawn of mass culture[5] – now, googling "alienhobomilfbuttholecosmicringtone" should yield any artist plenty to work with.

Ultimately, the exhibition registers less as a grand finale than as a lingering Catch-22. Culminating in "Day is Done" and the "Kandors", Kelley's relentless de- and re-sublimation of material culture veered close to the point of tipping over – into outperforming the level of symbolic capital of which he sought to deprive some of the very subjects in question (the epitome of this method is the slick re-envisioning of elements from the Superman comic series in the "Kandors" works). The level of culture in relation to which the work is now perceived and received is no longer "sub-" in any way. It is top-tier, precisely because the work is prized by an auratic sphere of choice in today's society: art.

DANIEL HORN

"Mike Kelley", Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, December 15, 2012–April 1, 2013; Centre Pompidou, Paris, May 2–August 5, 2013; MoMa PS1, New York, October 7, 2013–January 5, 2014; Museum of Contempory Art, Los Angeles, March–June 2014.

Notes

1 Sigmund Freud, Civilization and its Discontents, Standard Edition Vol. 21, transl. and ed. by James Strachey, London 1961 [1930], p. 99, f1. Sentence sequence reversed by the author.

2 This video is a component of "Fresno" (2004–05), which, like most of the 31 self-contained works "Day is Done" consists of, incorporates video, composed musical arrangements, photographs, props and sculptures, set-like structures, et cetera.

3 The reference to Destiny's Child was discussed by Kelley in a talk with Branden Joseph at the Getty Center, Los Angeles, in February 2006.

4 Cf. Sigmund Freud, The Interpretation of Dreams [1913], online at: http://books.eserver.org/nonfiction/dreams/.

5 "Change" is a notion that appears page after page as one of the central points of discussion in Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproduction" (1936). Regarding "change" as invoked in this context, see especially paragraphs I, XII, XIV, XV.