

## Back and Forth: Mike Kelley's Psychedelic Pedagogy

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By the early 1990s, Mike Kelley had emerged as a crucial figure in the Los Angeles art scene, a once seemingly secondary market that had become an international hub of artistic production. Kelley (1954–2012), known as a leading figure in the art of the abject, is most notably remembered for sculptural works created from stuffed animals and crocheted blankets salvaged from thrift stores. Analysis of Kelley's work reveals a career-long investigation of the performative relationship between artist and audience. Characterized as “antagonistic” (Diederichsen in Miller 2015, 110 n.12) towards his audience, critics have described Kelley as a “master provocateur” (Roussel 2012) who “abused his audience on account of ideas it had not yet voiced and perhaps not even considered” (Miller 2015, 17). These characterizations are based on the presuppositions that Kelley harboured a fundamental mistrust of the viewer and held a concomitant fear that his work would be misinterpreted and devalued because of arbitrary biases. This essay identifies the limits of these presuppositions about Kelley, which are informed by art criticism's focus on the antimony and “oppositional fixation” (Jackson 2011, 56) of the avant-garde. Departing from the dominant narratives on Kelley-as-antagonist, we suggest that a more robust interpretation of the artist's work comes from the premise that his entire oeuvre is organized around a dynamic pedagogical game that invites the viewer to co-produce a conflicting set of meanings that change over time. Framing the totality of Kelley's production as a series of interrelated performances—including his actual performances, his sculptures and installations, his films, essays, and even the speech acts contained in interviews about his practice—amends the dominant narratives about Kelley. Instead of the “clever master” revealing didactic truths to an ignorant audience, Kelley is, in fact, fascinated with the multiplicity of interpretations that his works elicit and is ultimately dependent on these modes of exchange to produce his works. In the pages that follow, we will describe Kelley's performative pedagogy as it is articulated in his essays and interviews about several of his works, including *Framed and Frame* (1999), *More Love Hours than Can Ever Be Repaid* (1987), *Educational Complex* (1995), *Day is Done* (2005), and *Mobile Homestead* (2010–present).

Informed by Cull (2012) and Fleishman (2012), who advocate for processes of analysis in which performance is an autonomous agent in dialogue with theory and not simply the object of philosophical scrutiny, we are interested in theory-building rather than theory. As Geertz explains, “the essential task of theory building is not to codify abstract regularities but to make thick description possible, not to generalize across cases but to generalize within them” (1973, 26). In this spirit, we will examine the extent to which Kelley's promotion of a “back and forth” relationship between artist and audience cultivates and performs a form of interdependency that invites spatial and structural shifts in knowledge transfer. Our essay will thus offer new insights into the complexity of the technical and philosophical underpinnings of Kelley's work, as well as an expanded consideration of the function of “art's refusal” (Baldacchino 2005) in pedagogical processes.

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## Framed and Frame

Look back and forth, back and forth, a number of times. See if you don't find yourself subsumed in a macrocosmic/microcosmic spatial shift—one colored a sublime—and dingy—psychedelic hue. (Kelley [1999] 2004, 126)

In an essay entitled “The Meaning is Confused Spatiality, Framed,” Mike Kelley provides readers with crucial information about how to interpret his work.<sup>1</sup> Describing his rationale for creating a simulacrum of a large-scale public fountain that exists in the Chinatown district of downtown Los Angeles, Kelley outlines his process in the following steps:

- fix shapes generally used to signify the formless;
- make clear some of the conventional devices used to give “amorphous” forms meaning;
- focus the attention of the viewer on discrete forms. ([1999] 2004, 123)

In this process, an object or artifact “becomes available for concrete viewing” (ibid., 123). As the title of his essay suggests, and as the title of the work he is describing—*Framed and Frame*—reinforces, Kelley is interested in the way that pictorial, architectural, and other spatial frames are related to narrative frames. Having identified the public fountain in Chinatown as a site of narrative complexity, Kelley created a copy of the sculpture and staged it in the gallery setting, thereby reframing it, in order to expose and twist existing narratives about the piece and its historical, cultural, and geographic location.

The Chinatown wishing well represents a time in the recent past when cultural exoticism on the civic level could flourish unchallenged. It represents an era in Los Angeles when Anna May Wong—the Chinese American actress famous for her roles as a variety of “others”—could plant a willow tree, donated in her honor by Paramount Studios, on the concrete lump and make it seem a proud moment. (Kelley [1999] 2004, 124)

By replicating this “schizophrenic” public artifact and placing it in the gallery setting, strategically separating it from the “ramshackle cyclone fence decorated to resemble a Chinese gate” which surrounds the original fountain, Kelley exposes it as a “pastiche of conflicting cultural references” (Kelley [1999] 2004, 120–21 and 124). This tactic, combined with a series of other sculptural and narrative framing acts in the exhibition, amounts, to Kelley, to “playing a . . . game” (ibid., 123).

With whom is Kelley playing this game? Why? And to what ends? It might seem, on examination, that Kelley's list of instructions (*fix shapes; clarify conventional devices; focus viewer's attention*) is reflective of a somewhat didactic or pedantic relationship toward the viewer. We would suggest, however, that a more fruitful insight into Kelley's motivations may come from Hal Foster's idea of “parallactic” work which “attempts to frame the framer as he or she frames the other” (1996, 203). Although he is not writing about the work of Mike Kelley specifically, we believe that Foster has identified a language that is applicable to Kelley.<sup>2</sup>

Essential to note is the relationship between Foster's idea of parallax and Kelley's idea of the psychedelic. Foster's notion of parallax refers to the “apparent displacement of an object caused by the actual movement of its observer,” underscoring “both that our framings of the past depend on

our positions in the present and that these positions are defined through such framings” (1996, xii). Mobilizing the idea of parallax to describe a range of postmodern aesthetic strategies, Foster explains the way in which such a framing shifts the discourse “away from a logic of avant-gardist transgression toward a model of deconstructive (dis)placement” (Foster 1996, xii). Further, it reflects the “turn from interstitial ‘text’ to institutional ‘frame,’” placing the viewer in a reflexive position to the work (Foster 1996, xii). As Kelley engages directly with processes of framing, Foster explains that he creates a “fictive space . . . for critical play” (Foster 1996, 161).

If Kelley’s work involves the creation of a fictive space for the purposes of critical play, then Kelley’s tasks—of fixing shapes, clarifying conventional devices, and focusing the viewer’s attention—are performed for psychedelic purposes. Shapes are fixed, conventions clarified and attention is focused so that the viewer can “look back and forth, back and forth a number of times” in a process that will lead to a “macrocosmic/microcosmic spatial shift—one colored a sublime—and dingy—psychedelic hue” (Kelley [1999] 2004, 126). For Kelley, the psychedelic participates in a dual reference system that is similar to Foster’s notion of the parallax. Parallax, which is “the apparent displacement or difference in apparent direction of an object as seen from two different points” (Merriam-Webster), is also a reference to the process by which human vision (produced by two eyes with overlapping visual fields) perceives depth and three-dimensional structure. In this sense, parallax as a phenomenon is a reference to both a failure of vision and an enhancement of vision. The psychedelic, which is a reference to a kind of cognitive disorganization (by way of drugs, music, or other media), is also a reference to that which is “mind-revealing.” The psychedelic failure is therefore also an enhancement—a technology or extension. Kelley suggests that viewers look back and forth, back and forth at a set of images that he has fixed, clarified, and focused so that we might find ourselves subsumed into a psychedelic space. Although the back and forth process of looking and the resulting psychedelic experience is disorienting—a failure of organization, so to speak—it nonetheless is designed also to reveal submerged possibilities of interpretation which might ultimately be construed as an enhancement. For Foster, such a process is reflective of the spatiotemporal, moral, and body-image “splittings of the subject that occur with a new postmodern intensity” (1993, 20). Kelley was aware of such splittings (and, as a voracious reader, he would have also been fully aware of Foster’s writings and ideas). Yet we wonder if perhaps Kelley’s *concept* of the psychedelic and others’ characterization of his work *as* psychedelic has suffered from a reductive tendency among critics.

In his interpretation of Kelley’s work, specifically, Foster suggests that the artist’s installations illustrate an “ethic of failure” (1994). Other critics have similarly organized Kelley’s engagement with the psychedelic in relation to bleak bewilderment (Kostov) and dystopic vision (Jablonski). While it is reasonable to identify these sentiments and themes in the work, we do not believe that Kelley operationalized the psychedelic in his art to arrive at the bleak or the dystopic. Perhaps these are by-product effects for viewers. However, Kelley himself guides us away from the alignment of the psychedelic exclusively in relation to failure and toward the idea of the psychedelic as technology. The artist explains that the “pastiche aesthetic,” which is the “primary signifier of psychedelic culture . . . promotes confusion, while at the same time postulating equality; all parts in chaos are equal” (Kelley 2000, 3). The psychedelic culture of 1960s radical youth, which, Kelley explains, “completely changed my worldview,” offered Kelley a set of aesthetic strategies to dialogue with viewers. In the next two sections, we will trace the way that Kelley articulates the function of disruption, confusion, and chaos in his communicative processes, with special attention to how his methods of art-making have been influenced by these tactics over time. Though this material does

not reference the psychedelic explicitly, Kelley's explanations of how words and images operate in art are the foundations upon which his psychedelic perspectives are formed.

### **The Familiar Ungraspable**

Kelley's words push and pull ideas across the pages of his exhibition catalogues, stretching our understanding of the objects and images he presents. This push-pull experience between his words and his objects seems to be by design, as Kelley explains that "by using a device which in our culture is the most common mode of explication—the written explanation—the expectation is destabilized. What looks so familiar becomes ungraspable" ([1997] 2003, 180). In this quote, Kelley is making reference to the work of his former teacher, Douglas Huebler. He prefaces this remark with an explanation of the difficulty of writing about his teacher's work, which makes him feel "confused" because "the text 'collides' or 'dances' with the image" (ibid., 179–80). "Look back and forth, back and forth," is his refrain at the conclusion of his 1999 essay for *Framed and Frame*. Eliciting viewers to repeatedly shift their focus between sites of meaning, Kelley hopes they will become "subsumed in a macrocosmic/microcosmic spatial shift." In the spirit in which Huebler creates collisions or dances between text and image, so Kelley has gone on to create collisions or dances between image and image and text and image and image and text again and again. To further dynamize the process, Kelley's text operates as a performance document drawing viewers into a set of requested actions to be repeated to psychedelic ends.

Kelley's essay for the Huebler exhibition catalogue, published in 1997, would have been written at a time when he was already many years into his thinking about the uncanny. John Miller explains a crucial shift in Kelley's work between 1983, when he produced a series called *The Sublime*, which "lampoon(ed) an aesthetic ideal," and 1993, when Kelley, in his *Uncanny* exhibition, moved into "eliciting visceral and emotional experience from artifice" (Miller 2015, 86). Miller argues that Kelley's exploration of the uncanny is an extension and also a tactical evolution of his exploration of the sublime. The uncanny retains its subversive power by virtue of its latent state. Yet Kelley's interpretation of Huebler's work is as something which exceeds the limits of the uncanny: "The result is not so much 'uncanny'—that is, the familiar become unfamiliar—as it is annoying. We crave familiarity and instead we are made dizzy" (Kelley [1997] 2003, 179–80). Huebler's work makes the viewer dizzy as it specifically, per Kelley, disrupts implicit expectations about how meaning will be ordered by an erudite master:

Like schoolchildren we seek to please the erudite master, the one who orders the visual chaos of the world, who renders it in clear language. We seek to please him through our understanding of his message, through shared communion with him. But this is a cruel teacher whose lessons elude understanding. You are left only with yourself, and the nervous laughter of doubt. (ibid.)

At this point in his thinking, has Kelley, who reads widely, encountered *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (Rancière 1991)? Or is the common trope of the master-apprentice relationship the only fuel in this scenario? Crucial, we believe, is Kelley's characterization of the "teacher whose lessons elude understanding" as "cruel." This characterization is consistent with other remarks that Kelley has made about the function of negativity in his own work. In his *Art 21* interview, Kelley says:

I think that's the joyfulness of it. But then it's a black humor. It's a mean humor. So, it's a critical joy. It's, you know, it's negative joy. [laughs] But that's art. I think, you know, for me. That's what separates it from the folk art that I'm going to. I still think the social function of art is that negative aesthetic. Otherwise there's no social function for it. (Kelley 2005).

Using this constellation of thought as a reference point, we believe then that Kelley's characterization of the cruel teacher in the Huebler scenario is a master who enacts cruelty that has a pedagogical and, ultimately, social function. Black humour, mean humour is, for Kelley, a kind of critical joy. This criticality is a negative aesthetic that is constitutive of the social function of art. Kelley draws viewers into a dizzying relationship with content that eludes the clarity and communion that they might expect to emerge out of a conventional master-apprentice relationship. This dizzying relationship between artist and viewer is also a social relationship—albeit a potentially isolating social relationship—in which “you are left only with yourself, and the nervous laughter of doubt.”

Invoking the term “cruelty” in conversation with claims about the social function of art automatically sets into motion questions about possible relationships between Kelley's thinking and ideas laid out by Artaud in *The Theatre and Its Double* (1958). More to the point of the interests of this special issue on pedagogy, we look at Kelley's remarks and writings on the relationship he is trying to cultivate with the viewer and wonder if his ideas live somewhere on the continuum presented by Rancière in his “Emancipated Spectator” essay (2007). Rancière examines the ways in which the project of reforming the theatre has historically wavered between the poles of Brecht's epic theatre and Artaud's theatre of cruelty. Do Kelley's ideas about his work oscillate between, per Rancière, Brecht's processes of distant inquiry and Artaud's call for vital embodiment? It is precisely the oscillating quality of Kelley's work that we think makes it interesting. Kelley does not fall squarely into a Brechtian context in which the spectator is distanced and placed in the role of the objective observer, examining phenomena and seeking their cause. Neither does Kelley fully absorb the Artaudian impulse to eliminate the distance between spectators and the work in order to draw them into the magical power of theatrical action. With his *Framed and Frame* essay, Kelley suggests that he is attempting to leverage aspects of both processes. On the one hand, he provides the list that we shared in the opening of our discussion: fix shapes, make clear conventional devices, and focus the attention of the viewer so that the work becomes available for concrete viewing. This has many of the elements that one might associate with Brecht's thinking. But at the conclusion of the same essay, Kelley suggests that focusing the attention of the viewer is only the beginning, as he ultimately wants people to look “back and forth a number of times” until they become “subsumed by a macrocosmic/microcosmic spatial shift.” This gesture seems productive of an Artaudian sensibility. Kelley's strategies for engaging his viewers draw on both Brechtian and Artaudian tactics, yet perhaps because he grounded his practice in humour, he is never fully aligned with either. Such forms of parody, role-reversal, and pre-emptive playing “disturb dominant culture that depends on strict stereotypes, stable lines of authority, and humanist reanimations and museological resurrections of many sorts” (Foster 1996, 199).

### **Manipulating Popular Narratives**

In a 1992 interview with John Miller, Mike Kelley describes some of the early discoveries that he made while creating durational performances:

Perhaps because people have a short attention span you can get away with illogical developments if you make them unfold over a long period of time. People will assume that it is logical because they can't remember what happened before. So in my performances, say an hour into it, I would use the same terms, but I'd say something totally in opposition to what had been said half an hour earlier, and nobody would know. (Kelley in Miller 1992)

This discrete, even subliminal shift in communicating with his audience in the context of performance marks Kelley's interest in the manipulation of narrative, a theme which would be drawn out consistently over the course of his career. As he says in his *Art 21* interview, "sense always comes after the fact in my work. . . . It has to be available to the laziest viewer. And then on the more sophisticated level, as well" (Kelley 2005). Kelley is aware of and intrigued by the notion of communicating on multiple levels, as he says, and the way in which art practice invites particular forms of play—word play, the interplay of sender and receiver in processes of communication, shifts in meaning over time, and the mindfulness associated with manipulating expectations. To this extent, one might observe Kelley's self-awareness and his corresponding acts of manipulation to be forms of "resistance"—ways of liberating himself from the confines of expectations, modes of liberating the audience from their expectations through subtle changes in content and delivery.

Building on these ideas of play between sender and receiver in the production of meaning in or as art, Kelley describes the development of what has become his signature project, *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid* (1987), as a process of absorbing public perception (or misperception) into the interpretation of his work:

When I first started working with stuffed animals, I was responding to a lot of the dialogue in the 80's about commodity culture. But I was really surprised that when everybody looked at these works I made, they all thought it was about child abuse. Now that wasn't anything I expected. And not only did they think it was about child abuse, they thought it was about *my* abuse. So I said, well, that's really interesting. I have to go with that. I have to make all my work about my abuse. And not only that, about *everybody's* abuse. That this is our shared culture. This is the presumption that all motivation is based on some kind of repressed trauma. (Kelley 2005)

In this sense, while the genesis of Kelley's idea for *More Love Hours* begins from one point of origin located within popular culture—"the dialogue in the 80's about commodity culture"—he is comfortable absorbing the fact that the public not only did not pick up on this meaning in the work, but that they instead read "abuse" into the work. Rather than taking an antagonistic stance outright to what one might see as misinterpretation, Kelley instead creates an endless loop of meaning in which the public's interpretation of the work as being about Kelley's personal abuse is then transformed into a work about "everybody's abuse."

In subsequent works, such as *Educational Complex* (1995) and *Day is Done* (2005), Kelley continues to create spaces that could be defined as an interiorization of the outside. With *Educational Complex*, he picked up on the popularization of "Repressed Memory Syndrome," which had gained quite a bit of media attention through scandalous televised court cases in which adult children accused parents of abuse, years after it had allegedly occurred, because therapists had helped them to "uncover" memories that had been repressed. Kelley responded to this public phenomenon by creating "an

architectural model constructed from foam core that amalgamates the floor plans of every school that [he] ever attended” complete with reconstructed “floor plans from memory, facetiously claiming that the spaces he could not remember were sites where he had been abused” (Miller 2012). Anticipating that the public—which was “infatuated” (Kelley 2006) with issues of Repressed Memory Syndrome and child abuse—would naturally read this content into his sculpture, Kelley intentionally invited, even coaxed this interpretation. Coyly, Kelley impersonates a hypothetical viewer when he says, “Like why can’t Mike Kelley remember all these rooms in the schools he went to every day for, you know, most . . . half of his life,” only to resolve the rhetorical question by remarking, “Well, nobody can” (Kelley 2006). He is aware that the reason he can’t remember the specific details of all of the buildings from his childhood is that “nobody can”—everyone is inclined to forget these details over time. But the delicious joke is to toy with the contemporary public interest in this debunked syndrome and draw it into the work. As John Miller explains, “While the non-existence of evidence doubtlessly intrigued Mike in this work, he used it to put forward a kind of allegorical institutional critique: the abuse exacted by the institution concerns exclusion and legitimation, nothing less than a matter of symbolic life and death” (Miller 2012).

In relation to his 2005 piece *Day Is Done*, Kelley describes his relationship to popular culture: “Popular culture is really invisible. People are really oblivious to it. But that’s the culture I live in and that’s the culture people speak. My interest in popular forms is not to glorify them, because I really dislike popular culture in most cases” (Kelley 2010). And yet Kelley actively uses popular culture as his source material in *Day Is Done*, an elaborate film series in which Kelley directed performers to re-enact hundreds of rituals associated with high school—from pep rallies to quasi-religious celebrations. But the rituals are delivered through Kelley’s characteristically warped perspective: the pep rally crowd does a familiar cheer, but some of the students are dressed in odd masks; a young girl riding a donkey is serenaded by a “kind of” barbershop group of male singers, but their tune is strange and dark.

Kelley further complicates his relation to popular culture, and its role in his understanding of his own experience and even of reality, when he explains that all of his work “is associative and comes from my own experience, but its very hard to, say, to disentangle memories of films, or books or cartoons or plays from “real” experience, it all gets mixed up, so, in a way, I don’t make such distinctions. And I see it all as a kind of fiction” (Kelley 2005). Kelley regularly expresses fascination—even delight—with social ritual as well as the ritualizing of social practice through art, and the unique role that art can play in exposing the dysfunction inherent in these rites and rituals, given that “art is some sort of interesting area where dysfunction is allowed” (Kelley in Miller 1992). Kelley, then, through radical and perverse forms of inclusion (including elements of popular culture and both the associations he makes and doesn’t make with it), offers a form of refusal (Baldacchino 2005). In this sense, he works not to replicate what he observes or interprets, but rather offers a form of rejection, which is built into a familiar container. And as he is characteristically interested in multiple modes of reception—as he says, from the laziest viewer to the most sophisticated—he creates in such a way that audiences might read the work only for its surface meaning, or they might seek to find new, unexpected or even “incorrect” readings of the work—which can then be reabsorbed by Kelley as the work continues to produce meaning over time.

## Poetic Work of Translation

As we discussed earlier in this essay, John Miller has suggested that Kelley “trumped up” or otherwise inflated the possibility that the missing information in *Educational Complex* might actually be a literal manifestation of Repressed Memory Syndrome. This fabrication, in Miller’s interpretation, is part of Kelley’s particular typology of pre-emptive antagonism, which was a reaction to Kelley’s perception that his audience would misinterpret or otherwise “dumb down” the reading of his work. Based on the extensive evidence that Miller draws on in his study, this interpretation of Kelley’s motives is reasonable. And we are not in a position to question the validity of these findings. Yet we are concerned that perhaps Miller’s characterization might contribute to the fetishization of the combative, the disruptive, the oppositional and the uncomfortable in contemporary art: “Despite a call to re-embrace modernist unintelligibility, the focus on a hyperbolic toughness risks framing antagonism as a quite intelligible—and marketable—crash between two opposing forces” (Jackson 2011, 56).

Accordingly, we would like to ask what we might identify regarding Kelley’s implicit pedagogy if we set aside the idea that he was motivated by a fear that his artwork “would devolve into a morass of arbitrary biases,” abusing his audience “on account of ideas it had not yet voiced and perhaps had not even considered” (Miller 2015, 17). Whereas Miller is suggesting that Kelley employs his pre-emptive antagonism to control the narrative and stave off idiotic responses, we are inclined to conclude instead that Kelley stages intentionally contradictory affective scenarios that produce discomfort for viewers. We return to this passage from Kelley’s essay for the Huebler catalogue:

His work seems to ask me to ponder it, to think it over. But my responses are generally in opposition to this apparent directive. I have an unconscious physical response—I laugh. I am confused, which is surprising, in that, on the surface, his work often looks so dumbly straightforward. (Kelley [1997] 2003, 179–80)

Does Kelley not ask the very same of his viewers? To ponder his work, to think it over while all the while provoking an unconscious physical response of laughter and discomfort—of confusion that is surprising and disorienting, even annoying. Yet it strikes us that even this framing continues to participate in the patterns by which “‘discomfort’ between art and receiver becomes the force worthy of critical interest” (Jackson 2011, 56).

Travelling back to Kelley’s *Framed and Frame* essay, we wonder what we might learn from Kelley’s interest in amorphous space—the “confused ‘nothing’ space of presexual consciousness” (Kelley [1999] 2004, 122). Kelley arrives at this point by explaining a phenomenon he noticed among beginning art students:

In a naive attempt to create “natural” tonal shifts, novice painters add black paint to colored pigment, producing an extremely ugly and unnatural color palette. At first I was disturbed by such coloration, but I have grown to admire it and gone on to produce works attempting to utilize it. . . . Part of my admiration for such coloration is the murky unspecific “space” it produces. (ibid.).

In this passage, we see Kelley reflecting simultaneously on his experience as a student and as a teacher. As a student, Kelley learned that such colouration was incorrect. As a teacher, Kelley

became interested in what this otherwise erroneous space could become—for its potentiality rather than its literal failure. The potentiality of the amorphous space then loops back to a point that Miller makes later regarding Kelley’s interest in the uncanny as that which “never permanently transforms reality” but instead “remains always *in potential*” which “allows it to be a constant yet always latent force” (Miller 2015, 86; emphasis in original). For Miller, Kelley pits his work not *above* the world, but *against* it (Miller 2015, 17). Miller suggests that Kelley’s tactics serve a corrective function, preemptively interfering with processes of reception in order to elicit desired affects. We would instead ask: Is the “counter-” action that is built into Kelley’s process not a conventionally antagonistic act, marked by a contrary or oppositional impulse but rather a catalyst for a series of counter-translations, with “counter-” in this sense being a process of response, a meeting, a return, in a circular or spiral pattern? Rancière explains:

From the ignorant person to the scientist who builds hypotheses, it is always the same intelligence that is at work: an intelligence that makes figures and comparisons to communicate its intellectual adventures and to understand what another intelligence is trying to communicate to it in turn. This poetic work of translation is the first condition of any apprenticeship. Intellectual emancipation, as Jacotot conceived of it, means the awareness and the enactment of that equal power of translation and counter-translation. (2007, 275)

Such a framing is more compatible with John Welchman’s characterization of Kelley’s work as “an associative matrix within which Kelley negotiates an elaborate network of allusions and symmetries” (2004, 120). The associative matrix description invites us to depart from the dominant narrative of Kelley as antagonistic and shift toward an understanding that he foregrounds complications in the exchange between artists and viewers purposefully through a parodic “trickstering of these very processes” (Foster 1996, 199). In work such as Kelley’s, “the nature of what it is to look is built into the work, itself. And certain strategies of representation are deployed to make us aware that part of the subject of the work . . . is something about the activity of looking” (Stone-Richards).

*Mobile Homestead*, a full-scale reconstruction of Kelley’s childhood home, which lives on the grounds of the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (MOCAD), opened just over a year after the artist’s untimely death by suicide. In an account provided by Marsha Miro, founding director of the MOCAD, while Kelley exhibited his trademark “dark humor” concerning the project’s future (as “doomed to failure”), he also expressed some uncharacteristically sanguine thoughts about the work’s potential: “He kept saying to me, ‘This is never going to happen—it’s a joke,’ because that’s the way he was. . . . But he also said he thought it would be one of the most important things he ever did, partly because it would keep on being a living piece” (Miro in Kennedy 2013).

The house, which pairs a main floor dedicated to community engagement projects with an elaborate network of subterranean rooms inaccessible to the public, has a kind of “split personality” (Kennedy 2013). Retrospectively, those who knew Kelley and many who did not know him at all have contemplated the significance of this piece, his last work, which was constructed posthumously and which is designed to live on indefinitely through the activities of others. As a “living piece,” it is a particularly poignant and disturbing commentary on his absence. Without wishing to speculate as to Kelley’s frame of mind while he was conceiving of this project, we think it is useful to ask how the idea of a “living piece” connects not only with the *Mobile Homestead* but also with the fundamental ideas that inform Kelley’s processes of meaning-making. Back and forth is the action that Kelley

promotes between the viewer and the objects and images that he provides. A psychedelic disruption is the desired outcome. Seemingly, the psychedelic is the end—the product of going back and forth, back and forth. But what if the psychedelic is not an end, but instead a system designed to begin again and again? A refusal to be fixed? Jonathan Fineberg explains that a work of art may provide “an opening and even a template for altering the way viewers meet the world . . . encountering something new in the world, the brain is forced to make something new in apprehending it” (2015, 147–49). In this manner, if we return to Kelley’s list—fixing shapes, making clear conventional devices, focusing attention on discrete forms—then is this process simply a matter of a set of temporary, repeated interventions? He fixes shapes, but not in order to keep them fixed. He fixes shapes to stop or interrupt conventional processes of representation and interpretation, inserting new frames that then shift focus or inspire different foci. In this way, he choreographs “the intimacy between being and following: to be (anything, anyone) is always to be following (something, someone), always to be in response to call from something, however nonhuman it may be” (Bennett 2010, xiii).

## Notes

1. Kelley’s essay was published in the exhibition catalogue for a solo show entitled “*Framed and Frame* (Miniature Reproduction ‘Chinatown Wishing Well’ Built by Mike Kelley after ‘Miniature Reproduction “Seven Star Cavern” built by Prof. H. K. Lu’) that ran 1999–2000)” “Test Room Containing Multiple Stimuli Known to Elicit Curiosity and Manipulatory Responses” at Le-Magasin-Centre National d’Art Contemporain, Grenoble, France, October 16, 1999 to January 16, 2000.

2. In point of fact, the content of Kelley’s work in *Framed and Frame* fits the critical conversation that Foster is trying to cultivate about “quasi-anthropological art” which is characterized by a “reductive over-identification with the other” (1996, 203). Although Foster does not specifically reference Kelley as creating the kind of parallax work that he advocates, in a separate section of Foster’s book, he does note that “Kelley plays on anthropological as well as psychoanalytic connections” (1996, 273 n.71).

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