



PROJECT MUSE®

How Mike Kelley Became Himself: The artist's search for
subcultural America

Jonathan Griffin

The Yale Review, Volume 112, Number 3, Fall 2024, pp. 129-153 (Article)



Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/tyr.2024.a936053>

- ➡ For additional information about this article
<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/936053>

How Mike Kelley Became Himself

The artist's search for subcultural America

Jonathan Griffin



FIRST SAW an artwork by Mike Kelley before I was able to recognize it as such. On the wall of a dorm room at the rural English boarding school I attended, someone had pinned a poster for Sonic Youth's 1992 album *Dirty*: a photograph of a stuffed toy crocheted from orange yarn, an alien with antennae and a bashful smile.

The image is one of a suite of eight photographs by the revered artist titled *Ahh... Youth!* (1991). Back then I felt it to be a vision of abjection. It may have been a kid's toy, but to my thirteen-year-old

self it stood for something tawdry and defiled, an icon of lost childhood. That year at boarding school, I was miserable. Exiled from the cozy security of my family home and from a preparatory school at which I had felt like a little king, I now contended with the physical dangers of older boys, as well as culture – notably grunge and other alternative music – that I experienced as aggressive and threatening.

In 1992, grunge was several years ahead of where I was at in my socio-cultural development. Its heart was in rainy Seattle, and closely associated with Sub Pop, a then-independent record label. Grunge came out of boredom and angst, a youthful disdain for the promises of Ronald Reagan's America and for the hypocrisy of conservative Christian cultural values. Following in the wake of punk, it stood in opposition to the arena bands that had come to dominate pop music in the 1980s, but this complicated its relationship to the corporatized world of MTV, which gave airplay to its artists. I had no beef with corporate America and few fears about the future. For me, it couldn't arrive soon enough.

What I was yet to understand when I first encountered *Dirty* was that, for some, the album was evidence that Sonic Youth had committed punk's cardinal sin: selling out. In 1990, the band – who were based in New York City, not Seattle – had signed to DGC, a subsidiary of Geffen Records, capitulating their "indie" credentials by joining a major label. *Dirty* was their ninth and most accessible album to date, aligned more with the fashionable grunge sound than their previous recordings, which seemed rooted in the uncompromising experimental downtown scene of New York. To some, a Sonic Youth album on Geffen was the death knell for the counterculture.

There are those who would argue that Kelley's visual art career crested in the heyday of grunge. He shared in its antagonism, its independently produced, low-grade aesthetic and its antiheroic self-image. He was – at least when he started out – an artist of the underground, who preferred to exhibit and perform his work



Mike Kelley, *Ectoplasm Photograph 7*, 1978/2009.

away from the bright lights of the mainstream, for his friends and supporters, who were always his best critics. But Kelley's talent and ambition, it would transpire, made that position untenable. Despite the increasingly expensive and complicated multimedia gallery installations that he produced later in his career, his most widely reproduced artwork is probably still that *Dirty* photo of the crocheted orange alien that he had purchased in a thrift store.

Kelley first met Kim Gordon—bass player, singer, and co-founder of Sonic Youth—in the late 1970s, while they were both art students in Los Angeles. When Gordon moved to New York in 1980, he went with her, but he soon returned to Los Angeles, a quieter, more dispersed, and more anonymous suburban city that may have reminded him of his hometown of Detroit. The artist grew up in the suburb of Westland, seven miles outside of Detroit proper. Google “Westland Michigan,” and the search engine offers an image of unprepossessing grassy backyards separated by chain-link fencing. As Charlie LeDuff remarks in his 2013 memoir, *Detroit: An American Autopsy*, Westland may well be “the only city in the world that renamed itself after its shopping mall.” The town, LeDuff says, was “the sort of place where people drive American cars, not German.” He describes a predominantly white working-class community including Italian, Scottish, and Irish immigrants. Kelley’s family was Irish-American, and he was raised Roman Catholic. Many people worked in the nearby factories of the Big Three automakers; his mother had a job as a cook at the Ford Motor Company. Kelley’s dad was the janitorial supervisor for the local school district, no doubt an influence on his son’s interest in the mechanics of education, one that would last a lifetime.

Many years later, through Kelley’s ambitious project *Mobile Homestead* (2005–2013), the world would become familiar with the house he grew up in: a white clapboard 1950s ranch-style home with a portico. After the house’s then-owner declined to sell it to him, Kelley reconstructed it as a near full-scale replica, the detachable front section of which he arranged to have driven

through Detroit on the back of a truck. In a salutary tour of honor, *Mobile Homestead* traveled the twenty miles from the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, to Palmer Road, Westland—where the original still stands—stopping along the way at sites of personal significance for the artist such as the John Glenn High School in Wayne, Michigan. On its return to the downtown museum, symbolically reversing the white flight exodus that had so depleted the inner city and bolstered the suburbs decades before, it settled at its permanent home, a patch of grass next to a parking lot.

Reflecting Kelley's stipulations, MOCA's website decreed that the recreated house itself was to be used as "a community gallery and gathering space featuring exhibitions and programs created by and for a diverse public that reflect the cultural tastes and interests of the local community." Underneath the house, however, was a two-story subspace sunk forty feet into the ground. In the upper basement level, Kelley mirrored the floorplan above, except he blocked all the doorways; these underground spaces were now accessible only by ladders rising from tunnels dug one level deeper. A single small hatch in the floor of a bedroom closet granted access to this nightmarish subterranean labyrinth. The project's website states that it would be "reserved for secret rites of an anti-social nature" and would be permanently off-limits to the general public. As this phase of the installation got underway, in January 2012, Kelley killed himself at his home in Los Angeles.

TWELVE YEARS ON, Kelley's ghost continues to haunt the contemporary art world. Organized by the Tate Modern in London, *Ghost and Spirit* is a new multi-venue survey of Kelley's protean output. The show first opened at the Bourse de Commerce in Paris last year and moved to Düsseldorf at the K21 Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen before traveling to the Tate Modern, London, in October. In 2025 it will conclude its tour at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm.

While Kelley's artistic influence is considerable, the man himself remains largely an enigma, despite the volumes of autobiographical



The image of the stuffed toy crocheted in orange yarn from Kelley's series of photographs *Ahh... Youth!* (1991) (top left) became most recognizable as the album cover for Sonic Youth's 1992 album *Dirty*.



In one of his most famous works, *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid and The Wages of Sin* (1987), Kelley stitched together handmade stuffed animals and crocheted dolls on a blanket to make a large wall-mounted panel. After he died, friends and admirers created an homage to the work in a vacant lot near the artist's home.

(or quasi-autobiographical) art and writing he left behind. Kelley was a prodigious author, using writing, as many do, to process and better understand the things that fascinated him: UFOs, underground comics, folk art, the work of his peers and precursors, especially those he felt were underrecognized. In many of his essays he recalled his Midwest upbringing, as if turning it over in his hands, trying to make sense of it. He was not above fictionalizing parts of it, traversing the ill-defined boundary between memory and mythology. In her catalog essay for *Ghost and Spirit*, curator Catherine Wood quotes him: “I was part of the TV generation, I was Pop. I didn’t feel part of my family, I didn’t feel part of my country; I had no sense of history: the world seemed to me a media façade, a fiction, and a pack of lies. This, I believe, is what has come to be known as the postmodern condition.”

When Kelley returned to the source of his story for *Mobile Homestead*, bringing a model of his childhood home on Palmer Road to meet the real thing, he seemed to have been describing his personal experience of postmodernity through the lens of class mobility. Class, for Kelley, as it is for all of us, is relational. But is it inherent, baked into one’s bones, he seemed to ask, or is it an encultured fiction? And, if it is a fiction, what does it take to rewrite that story?

The old-world stability of Kelley’s working-class identity experienced its first rupture in 1973, perhaps, when he enrolled in the undergraduate program at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor some twenty-odd miles away. In leaving Westland, he was already far exceeding the expectations of most of the young people in his community; arriving in Ann Arbor, however, he found some of his own expectations disappointed. Kelley saw the course he had joined as staunchly traditionalist: according to the artist, instructors taught painting according to the formalist “push/pull” precepts of compositional theory developed in the 1940s by abstract painter and pedagogue Hans Hofmann, who in his own work had advocated for rejecting all representational subject matter in favor of areas of color that appeared to emerge or recede from the

canvas's surface. Kelley never got over his resentment of formalist abstraction, the historical dominance of which he considered a conspiracy of Reaganite conservatism.

Reflecting later on his formative influences, Kelley identified two momentous experiences from this period, neither connected to the university. The first was in 1972, a concert by Sun Ra & His Solar Arkestra at the Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival. Kelley described the show as "a mixture of African, exotica, big band, science fiction, Greek chorus, and political rally," shifting abruptly back and forth between genres. Kelley called it "the most intellectually and physically demanding show I have ever seen." The second was a gig by Iggy and the Stooges in 1974, at a biker bar in Wayne, Michigan. Iggy, Kelley recalled, was "dressed in a ridiculous jazz dancer's outfit, a kind of leotard with spangle skirt. His eyes were ringed sloppily with eyeliner and a cigarette drooped from his lips. His whole demeanor said 'fuck you.'" In Kelley's account, Iggy invited requests from the crowd, ignored them, then played a cover of the 1963 Kingsmen hit "Louie Louie." When the song ended, Iggy asked again for requests, then played "Louie Louie" all over again. Goading their hecklers, the band played it a third time. Eventually, the show devolved into an outright brawl.

Iggy's attitude and Ra's restlessness can be sensed in much of Kelley's work. It was certainly in evidence in the performances of Destroy All Monsters, the band that Kelley formed in Ann Arbor in 1974 with his friend, the artist Jim Shaw, plus an eighteen-year-old college dropout who went by the name Niagara and her boyfriend Cary Loren, a filmmaker. Only Loren knew how to play an instrument. Two days after the band was formed, they played their first gig, at a comic book convention. "We crashed it and asked the Trekkie band if we could use their P.A. system," Kelley wrote. "We played one song: two lines from Black Sabbath's 'Iron Man' repeated over and over against a wall of feedback. We were thrown out." Kelley regarded Destroy All Monsters' concerts, which involved all manner of unconventional equipment, from

hair dryers and vacuum cleaners to rattles and squeeze toys, as art installations as much as musical performances.

His developing position—about art and music but also American social life itself—was not shaped by punk adversarialism alone. “It was connected,” he said in a late interview, “with the death of radical popular music in the late 1960s, with the death of left politics in general, and with the huge economic crash of the 1970s.” At a moment in which the utopian ideals of the 1960s had soured, Kelley was consumed by a search for materials and activities that were both unacceptable to the artistic avant-garde and incommensurable with mainstream American society. When, after graduation, he moved from Ann Arbor to Los Angeles, he went directly to Valencia, a bedroom community thirty miles north of the city, where he enrolled at the California Institute of the Arts.

Nicknamed locally as “Walt Disney’s Dream School,” CalArts opened on a newly built campus in 1971, subsuming and relocating the existing Chouinard Arts Institute, founded half a century earlier and which had fallen into financial difficulties. With his brother Roy, Disney had envisioned and funded a new, utopian, and multidisciplinary college of the arts. In the 1970s, the fine art department of CalArts was dominated by the associated movements of Fluxus and Conceptualism. The new faculty developed its radical syllabi in opposition to the Disney family’s conservative politics. Painting and handmade sculpture were out; theory, non-Western philosophy, found objects, films, performances, events, and happenings were in. There was a clothing-optional swimming pool and day-long “crits” that turned into parties, the professors consorting with the students.

The Conceptual artist John Baldessari taught a course at CalArts titled Post-Studio Art, which he defined as “work that is done in one’s head.” Baldessari had cremated all his paintings in 1970, then baked cookies using the ashes. (Photographs of the event became an artwork, along with an affidavit and a jar of black cookies.) Despite his rejection of the bourgeois economy of painting, Baldessari distinguished himself among his peers by pursuing

an active commercial exhibition schedule, which frequently took him to New York and Europe, where such things as certificates and photographs of happenings and jars of ashy cookies could more easily find sympathetic collectors. In fact, in the 1970s, the California scene was revered by many in the European avant-garde as the original seedbed of the counterculture: the home of hippies, rockers, psychedelic drugs, Eastern thought, self-realization.

Arriving in 1976, when the “post-studio” CalArts method was settling comfortably into orthodoxy, Kelley looked around for a space in the scene. Like many talented students, he formed close relationships with certain influential teachers, notably David Askevold, whom Kelley described as a “difficult conceptualist.” After Kelley graduated in 1978, they collaborated on photographs depicting Kelley with cotton-batting ectoplasm coming out of his nose. *The Poltergeist*, made in 1979, was a recreation of nineteenth-century Spiritualist photographs that purported to prove the existence of ghosts, only this time manifested through the hokey special effects of B-movies and television. The joke, in part, was on Conceptual artists, who equated documentary photography with objectivity and informational clarity. Kelley was fond of occult aesthetics, but never the occult per se. “Occult rituals interest me because they are akin to art-making,” he observed, needling the recondite knowledge and suspension of disbelief that some Conceptual artworks required in order to be appreciated—his own included.

At CalArts and through the early 1980s, Kelley devised grueling solo performances in which he would deliver long monologues and interact with objects, some made by him, some found. These drawn-out provocations were apparently as hard to watch as they were to perform, often lasting for hours and unfolding without any obvious narrative structure. Kelley allowed few of these performances to be documented, he later explained, so that “nobody could go back and make ‘sense’ or ‘non-sense’ out of them.”

For his 1978 MFA thesis show, Kelley presented a series of eight, white-painted birdhouses plus a chicken brooder, constructed according to parodic how-to manuals, which he also wrote. The

birdhouses had titles that had nothing to do with birds. *Gothic Birdhouse*, for example, had a nine-tiered roof. *Catholic Birdhouse* had two holes, one large, one small and scratched. Above the smaller hole was written “The hard road” and, beneath the large one, “The easy road.” These were items one might discover in a country gift shop, next to tea towels and trivets bearing moralizing aphorisms and Bible verses.

“I’d say my work is primarily about playing with conventions,” Kelley explained in a late interview. “Many of the subjects and materials I work with have little to do with my personal tastes.” To play with convention or with taste was, for Kelley, a means of transgressing orthodoxy that harked back to his instinctive resistance to his Roman Catholic upbringing. Now he was applying that impatience to the orthodoxies he encountered in art—a field that supposedly valued freedom above all else. Before postmodernism dissolved the notion of “cultural progression” in the 1980s, avant-garde art movements typically defined themselves against whatever vanguard had come right before it. Pop Art (to radically oversimplify the story) was the antithesis of Abstract Expressionism; Minimalism reacted against Pop; Conceptualism reacted against Minimalism. Neo-Expressionist figure painting emerged, in the 1980s, in opposition to Conceptualism, as did the appropriation art of the Pictures Generation, which also opposed Neo-Expressionism. Before consensus settled on the answer “anything goes,” throughout the twentieth century artists were, in the broadest sense, asking what art could be. With his homely birdhouses and his ectoplasm photographs, Kelley was giving the art world something that felt new, things that did not look, to some people, much like fine art at all.

According to Kelley, the birdhouses were received as humorous critiques of the reductive, primary forms of Conceptualism and Minimalism. But, he came to realize, that response missed the point. His aim was not to raise a craft object to the status of fine art. Rather, as he said years later,

here's a structure that's loaded with pathos, and you still don't like it, you don't feel sorry for it, you want to kick it. That's what I wanted out of the thing—an artwork that you couldn't raise, there was no way that you could make it better than it was. Its function as art actually makes it more uncomfortable. A birdhouse is something that's normally nice, but if it's art then it becomes a problem....My intention was always to keep things on the same level, or reduce them to a lower level than the one they began with.

Kelley first used stuffed animals for *Half a Man*, a loose rubric under which several smaller projects were assembled between 1987 and 1993. He drew on gendered craft techniques such as crocheting or woodwork to bring to the surface ideas about desire, familial aggression, abuse, and church indoctrination. Toys were placed around the edge of knitted Afghan blankets laid out on the floor, much as if the teddies were participating in a support group about their traumas. In one of his best-known works, he joined together handmade stuffed animals and crocheted dolls on a blanket to make a large wall-mounted panel, a lampoon of abstract painting. Kelley called it *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid and the Wages of Sin* (1987), pointing to craft's hidden gift economy through which adults put children in their permanent debt. "Gift giving is like indentured [sic] slavery," Kelley once commented, only partly in jest.

"I hate folk art," Kelley wrote in 2001. The term, he argued, was only used to refer to traditional handicrafts, benign and dripping with nostalgia and morality. What about zines and comic books? Were they not also folk art? Thrift store paintings and prison tattoos? Halloween costumes? Garage rock? Amateur porn?

Over the years these made their way into Kelley's art, as his work became increasingly collected. He showed in commercial galleries in the United States and Europe and began to receive invitations from institutions who were willing to sponsor more ambitious and less saleable projects. In addition to the stuffed animal sculptures,



The *Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstruction* series was comprised of photographs—and sometimes performances—inspired by excised images from old yearbooks. #32 (*Horse Dance of the False Virgin*) (2004–2005) was performed in 2009 at the Judson Memorial Church in New York.

he created installations, often covering gallery walls with murals or fabric banners—a format he'd first encountered in Bible school that also recalled the banners used by trade union organizations and sectarian Irish parades. One of his early banners proclaimed: "PANTS SHITTER & PROUD P.S. JERK-OFF TOO (AND I WEAR GLASSES)." Despite his gathering success, self-deprecation and abasement were integral to Kelley's persona.

A career watershed came in 1992, when Kelley was invited to participate in the prestigious Documenta exhibition in Kassel, Germany, to which he contributed a garden shed that doubled as an "orgone accumulator"—a pseudoscientific contraption designed by Austrian doctor Wilhelm Reich in the 1940s to collect "orgone energy," which he believed was a form of life force. That same year, Paul Schimmel curated the epochal exhibition *Helter Skelter* at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, surveying the brightest lights of the youthful Los Angeles art scene, artists whose subject matter inclined toward "alienation, dispossession, perversity, sex, and violence." Kelley was, of course, included.

In 1993, at the age of thirty-nine, Kelley had his most prestigious exhibition to date, a mid-career survey at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Titled *Catholic Tastes*, the show featured the best of his art: the stuffed animal works, including *Ahh... Youth!*, felt banners, drawings, and installations. Roberta Smith of *The New York Times* described it as resembling "the room of an unbathed polymath teen-ager or the lair of a rec-room mystic." As his friend, the artist John Miller, later wrote, "the exhibition exposed standards of taste as an invidious social logic that stigmatizes working-class values"—specifically those of "Roman-Catholic immigrants who entered the otherwise Protestant society of the United States on the bottom rung." In a photograph on the cover of the catalog, Kelley, dressed as a janitor, is shown pushing a mop.

I MOVED TO LOS ANGELES in 2010, leaving behind the U.K.'s fixations with class, regional identity, and social conformity. Or so I thought. For the most part I was simply unable to read those dynamics in my

new adopted home. Many references in Kelley's work had always been out of reach for European viewers, even as they responded enthusiastically to its tone and textures and consumed American movies and music. (Strangeness is its own currency.) The Native American maiden whose image was featured on the packaging for Land O'Lakes butter was an object of Kelley's boyhood sexual fantasies and a general signifier of mid-century, middle-American domesticity. To me, she meant nothing, although I could join the dots in a work such as Kelley's *Slightly Psychedelic Depiction of the Sexualized Land O'Lakes Girl (High Priestess)* (1996). His reference in one early performance—*Meditation on a Can of Vernors*—to a Detroit-based brand of ginger ale, he acknowledged, was mysterious even to many Americans who hadn't grown up in the Midwest.

Exotic to me, too, were the various American high school traditions that structured Kelley's *Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstruction* series, which began in 2000 and continued until near the end of his life. In this project, he excised photos from old high school yearbooks, pictures that had nothing directly to do with education but which showed dress-up days, pageants, proms, spirit weeks, Halloween parties, plays and musicals, religious performances, contests, hazing rituals, and so on. He then extrapolated his own narratives from those photographs, narratives that he turned into scripts and staged with adult actors. Some took the form of framed pairs of photographs—original and reconstructed—and an accompanying video. *Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstruction #25 (Devil: Master of Ceremonies)* (2004–2005), for instance, was based on a photograph of a grinning man in a Satan costume. Some EAPRs (as they are often abbreviated) were only photographs. Others involved performances, such as *EAPR #32 (Horse Dance of the False Virgin)* (2004–2005), which Kelley performed in a 2009 event at the Judson Memorial Church in Greenwich Village, New York. The venue remains renowned as the space where Merce Cunningham and Yvonne Rainer staged avant-garde dance pieces in the early 1960s. Kelley's event involved a live band playing riffs on genres from 1960s garage rock and

Minimalism to horror movie soundtracks. (The music was composed in collaboration with Scott Benzel.) There were pantomime horses, a marching band, and performers parodying Judson-style dance, with Kelley in the role of a high school gym instructor, dressed in a white singlet and blowing a whistle.

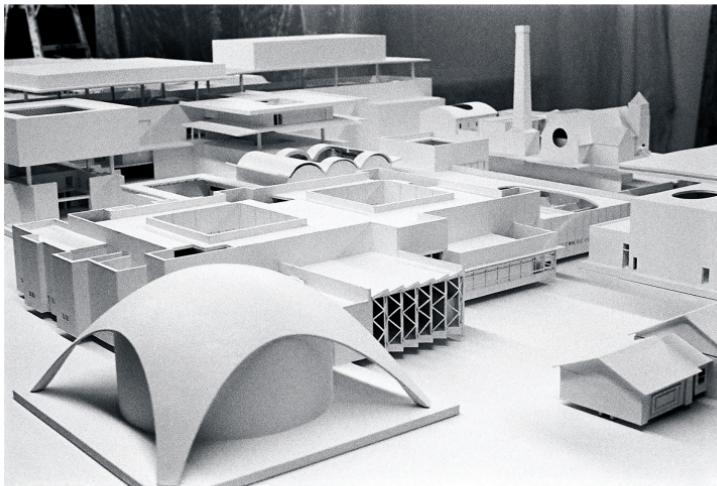
This was not Kelley's first return to school. In 1995, he fabricated a large and detailed architectural model that purported to reconstruct every educational institution he'd ever passed through, starting with his house on Palmer Road and ending with CalArts. The real point of *Educational Complex*, as the sculpture was titled, was not so much its recollections as its lapses; where Kelley could not remember a floor plan, he simply left gaps in the model. In the previous decade, the media, reporting on child abuse cases such as the McMartin preschool trial, was fixated with a phenomenon known as "repressed memory syndrome." This contested condition posited that following trauma, especially sexual abuse, children's memories may involuntarily erase themselves. If there were classrooms Kelley could not remember, ran the logic of the syndrome, that must mean he was suppressing traumatic memories—which he insisted he was not. (He was always fascinated by the common misinterpretation of his stuffed animal sculptures as testaments to his own supposed childhood abuse.) If the tabletop *Educational Complex* laid out a putative map of a psyche, then, of special significance were the various schools' basement levels, visible from underneath the table. The literal underground corresponded, in Kelley's view, both to the subconscious and—as indicated by the basement of *Mobile Homestead*—to an idea of a cultural underground.

A few months after I arrived in L.A., Kelley exhibited *EAPRs* #34 and #35 at Gagosian Gallery in Beverly Hills alongside pieces from his *Kandors* series. These were large, sumptuously colored glass bell jars, dramatically lit, each of which contained a fantastical resin cityscape reminiscent of *Educational Complex*. This important late body of work arose from the artist's affinity for comics, more specifically his interest in those who took comics seriously into adulthood. Kandor, for the uninitiated, was a city on Superman's





Kelley's *Day Is Done* exhibition at Gagosian Gallery in New York in 2005 inaugurated the proudly blue-collar artist's relationship with the blue-chip gallery.



In *Educational Complex* (1995), Kelley reconstructed a large and detailed model of every educational institution he attended. Where he could not remember a floorplan, he left gaps in the model.



Mobile Homestead (2005-2013) features a near full-scale replica of Kelley's childhood home in Detroit.

doomed home planet of Krypton. Before the planet exploded, the evil Brainiac used a shrinking ray to miniaturize Kandor and preserve it in a bottle, which Superman subsequently managed to rescue but never de-miniaturize. As Kelley explained it, Kandor “is a constant reminder of [Superman’s] lost homeland and functions metaphorically as a symbol of his alienated relationship to the planet where he now resides.”

The Beverly Hills exhibition caught the local art world’s attention for a number of reasons. Primarily, it was Kelley’s first solo gallery show in his adopted hometown for nearly a decade. It followed a spectacular exhibition, *Day Is Done*, at Gagosian Gallery in New York, in 2005, in which he presented a huge carnivalesque installation convening *EAPRs* #2 through #32. (The first iteration in the series, #1, was made in 2000, for an exhibition in Rome and did not join the other works in New York.) *Day Is Done* had raised eyebrows because it inaugurated the proudly blue-collar artist’s professional relationship with the blue-chip Gagosian. Times had changed, however, since those grunge years when “selling out” represented an unforgivable betrayal. The new, less forgiving economic realities in music and art made the phrase sound quaint and nostalgic. Most critics commented only on *Day Is Done*’s intellectual and visual fireworks. By the time of the 2011 show, the affiliation with a major commercial gallery was old news.

The Beverly Hills show came on the heels of news that Kelley was working on a major project with the British public art commissioning agency, Artangel, to be produced with the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit. *Mobile Homestead* returned Kelley to the source of many of his personal mythologies, to a set of nested contexts that underwrote his entire output. (The Midwest; Michigan; Detroit; Westland; Palmer Road; his childhood home.) Not only was he effectively opening up that house to public access, he was also relating it, through accompanying documentary videos of its tour through the city, to broader social issues of urban blight, racial division, cultural diversity, and economic history. His work, which

had often relied on his personal history to the point of solipsism, was expanding to its most inclusive reach. There was a sense that Kelley was at the peak of his powers.

This was an artist whom many in Los Angeles knew only as Mike, who still lived in a modest house in the east of the city, who still drove an old Volvo and took his assistants and former students out for lunch at Sizzler. He had graduated from being a precocious irritant at CalArts to one of its most respected teachers, alongside long-standing appointments at other schools including the ArtCenter College of Design in Pasadena. He employed many of his ex-students as studio assistants, generating his own micro-economy in the city's art community. He was exhibiting his work with the glitziest gallery in the world, while making work about teenage deviancy and comic books.

In his essay "Last Artist of the Counterculture," the art historian Thomas Crow observed how Kelley's professional stature was threatened in the 1990s by the rise of artists such as Damien Hirst, Jeff Koons, and Takashi Murakami, all of whom outsourced fabrication of "exceptionally costly works with high visual impact" intended to appeal to the tastes of plutocratic collectors at the top-most end of the market. (François Pinault and Eli Broad are names he offers as examples.) Kelley was ambitious for his art but unambitious in business. "Such terrain of enforced rivalry, however, with its forced proximity to obscene wealth, held patent dangers to the integrity of Kelley's enterprise," writes Crow. "Hence his recourse to re-living the truths of his own underground existence in the waning days of the Ann Arbor counterculture, in particular the operatic vividness imprinted on him by Sun Ra's performances."

A year after the Beverly Hills exhibition closed, the Los Angeles art community was rocked by news of Kelley's suicide. For most, with no inkling of the personal struggles of an artist seemingly at the top of his game, Los Angeles without Mike seemed unimaginable. He had come to represent a major aspect of the city's artistic identity, despite his sense of himself as an outsider. The day

after his suicide, a Facebook post from an account called “Mor Lovehours” invited friends and admirers of Kelley to join in recreating *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid and the Wages of Sin* at a vacant lot near Kelley’s home. A bedraggled shrine sprang up in the former carport. An assembly of blank-eyed soft toys and plushies were gathered around the base of the walls, candles crowded the floor, and Afghan rugs sagged on strings tied to the walls.

One of the crushing effects of suicide on the living is the implacable compulsion to ask why. The answers—there is never just one—are so private, so complicated, and perhaps ultimately so simple as to refuse comprehension. Looking back, it is difficult not to imagine a correlation between the professional position in which Kelley had found himself and a possible sense of having reached an impasse. The art world changed beyond recognition between those unruly years of subversion in the 1970s and the market-dominated art system of the 2010s, in which plutocrat collectors and global chain galleries held outsized sway. What was once seen as selling out had become the simple price of admission. Throughout his career, Kelley had sought—and created—spaces both figurative and literal in which irrational and unregulated creative impulses could flourish underground. The contemporary art world no longer seemed like that place. It is possible that he eventually felt himself backed into a corner, with nowhere left to go.

Today, Kelley appears as a figure from another time, though no less inspiring for it. He established a model for being an artist that many younger ones still aspire to, but to replicate that model is difficult. Despite the generous platforms that archive and preserve his art—new museum exhibitions, weighty monographs, a foundation—there remains a sense of inaccessibility to his work. It was so wide-ranging and cross-referential that its documentation will always be partial. It leaves the strong feeling that to really get it, you had to be there, and that impossibility burnishes the myth.

With little sentimentality, Kelley elevated the perspectives of people who were typically marginalized: children and adolescents; the untrained and the unskilled; the proletariat; the eccentric, the

aberrant, and the perverse. Since his death, the uncomprehending disconnect between America's liberal elites and its working classes has only widened. Kelley had a foot in both worlds. Perhaps that makes him sound like some sort of social justice warrior. Far from it. Kelley was too misanthropic for that. In the end, what he cared about, above all else, was art.