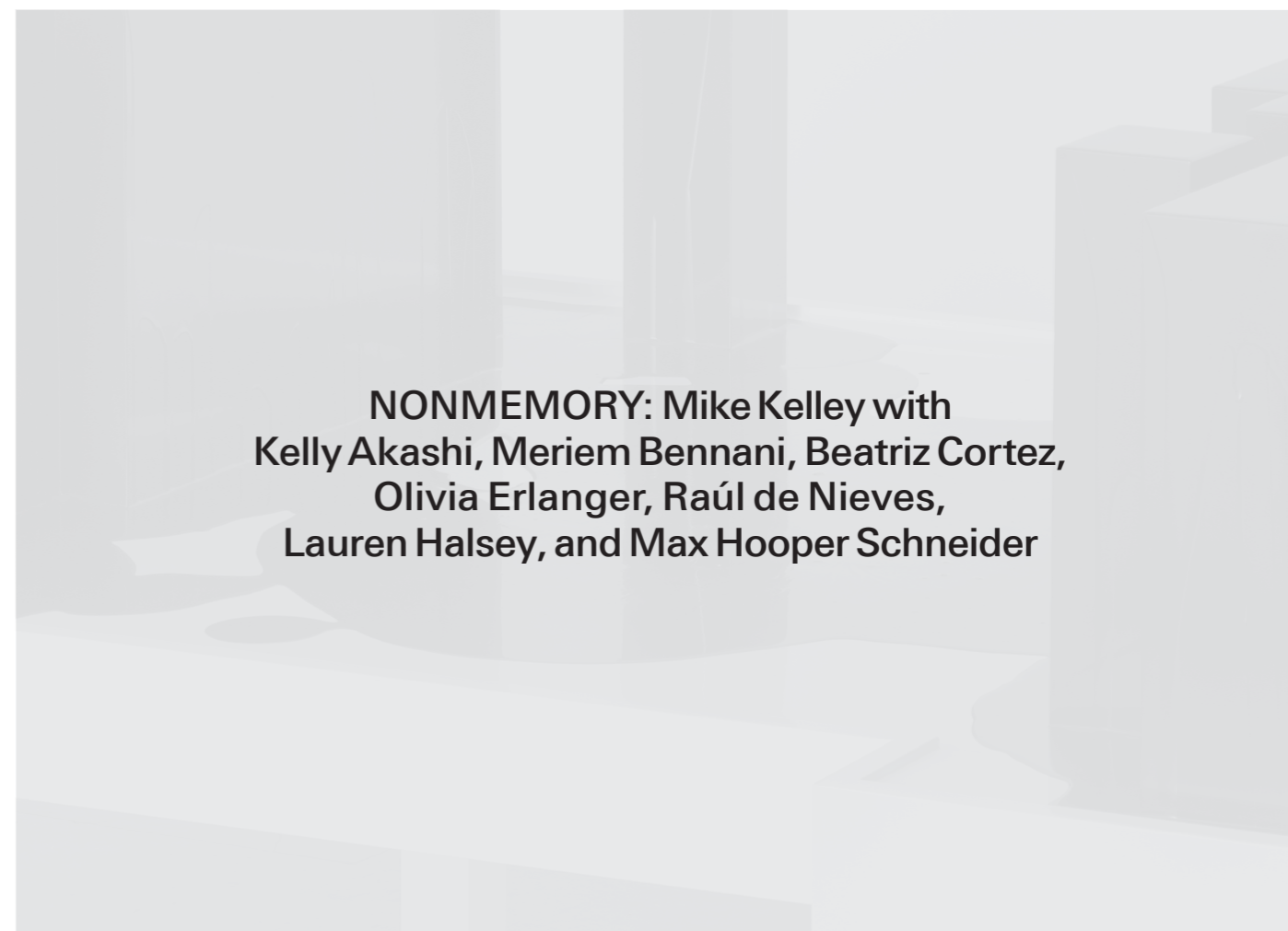


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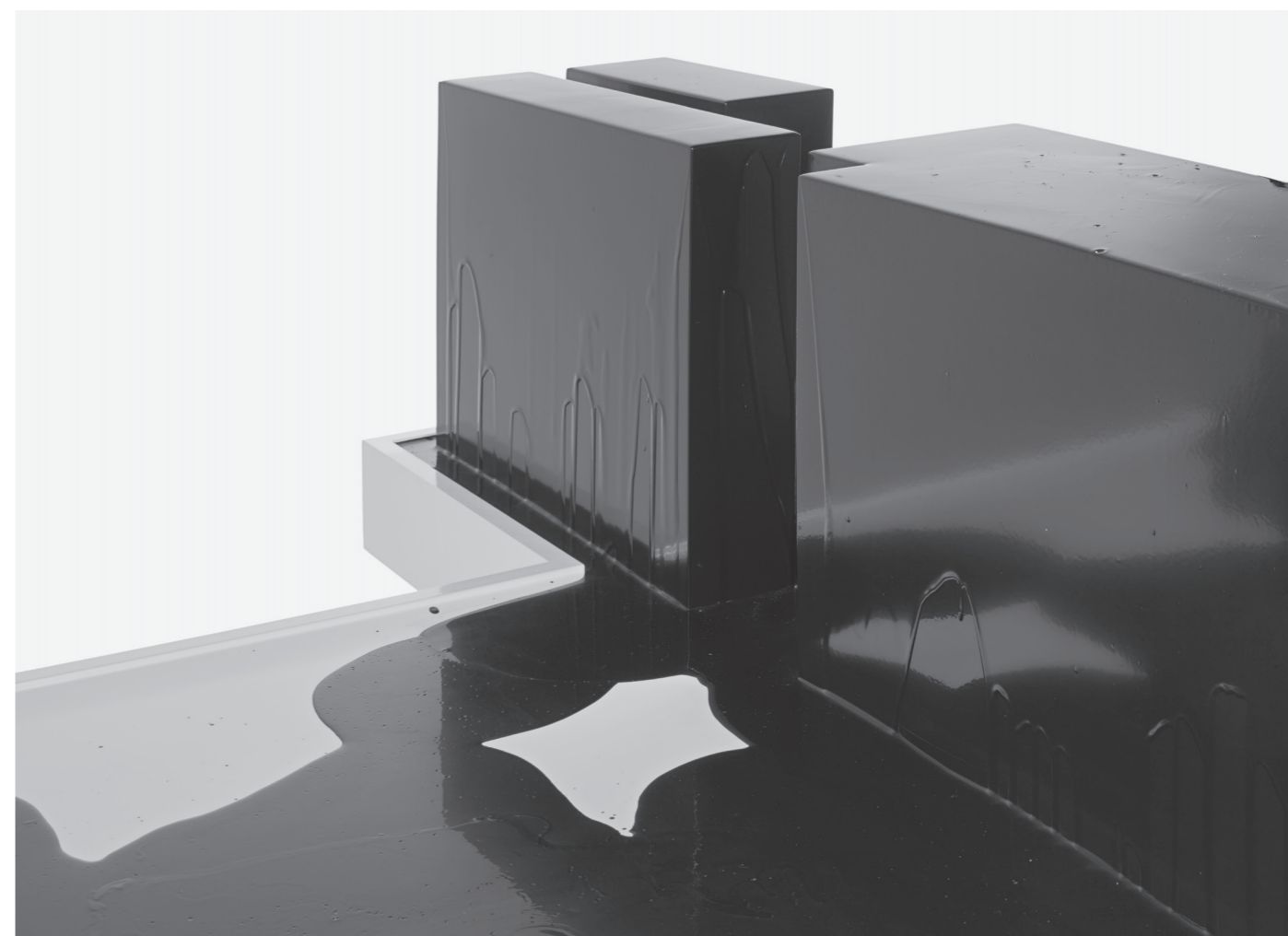
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NONMEMORY, Edited by Jay Ezra Nayssan



NONMEMORY: Mike Kelley with  
Kelly Akashi, Meriem Bennani, Beatriz Cortez,  
Olivia Erlanger, Raúl de Nieves,  
Lauren Halsey, and Max Hooper Schneider

Del Vaz Projects, Hauser & Wirth Publishers



# NONMEMORY

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## Contents

- 5 Introduction  
by Jay Ezra Nayssan
- 7 Exhibition Views
- 22 Architectural Non-Memory  
Replaced with Psychic Reality  
by Mike Kelley
- 34 I: Unstable Space  
by Jay Ezra Nayssan
- 46 Interview:  
Olivia Erlanger & Ruba Katrib
- 62 Interview:  
Meriem Bennani &  
Myriam Ben Salah
- 70 II: No Memory, No Form  
by Jay Ezra Nayssan
- 78 Interview:  
Max Hooper Schneider  
& Mary Clare Stevens
- 94 Interview:  
Raúl de Nieves & Ceci Moss
- 106 III: Space-Time (Exploded)  
by Jay Ezra Nayssan
- 118 Interview:  
Kelly Akashi  
& Kathryn Andrews
- 134 Interview:  
Beatriz Cortez  
& Daniela Lieja Quintanar
- 146 IV: Making Space  
by Jay Ezra Nayssan
- 154 Interview:  
Lauren Halsey & Jova Lynne
- 163 Works in the Exhibition
- 211 Index of Works
- 212 Contributor Biographies

The second half of Mike Kelley's career—beginning with *Educational Complex* (1995) and ending with *Mobile Homestead* (2005–2013)—was largely devoted to exploring the porosity of memory in relation to space and the production of extraordinary fantasy structures and imaginary landscapes that manifested a new psychic reality. Kelley's architectural and environmental reformulations arose from what he famously called the "non-memory" of various institutional spaces or built environments which he encountered throughout his life—from every school he attended, to a wishing well in the Chinatown district of Los Angeles, to representations of Kandor, the fictional metropolis of Superman, and finally to Kelley's own childhood home in Detroit, Michigan.

*Nonmemory* brings together seminal works by Mike Kelley and seven contemporary artists whose works all play with the role of memory as it posits our perceptions of space and place: Kelly Akashi, Meriem Bennani, Beatriz Cortez, Raúl de Nieves, Olivia Erlanger, Lauren Halsey and Max Hooper Schneider. Through a variety of media and material, the artists in this exhibition use space as a repository for dreams, fantasies, traumas, and anxieties, while offering opportunities to re-imagine and recreate reality. The title of the exhibition and this accompanying publication *Nonmemory* take direct inspiration from Kelley's use of the same term as a way of treating, reordering, and representing the complex and unstable relationship between memory, space, and identity.

The selection of works on view in *Nonmemory*, made in the last decade of the artist's life, between 2001 and 2011, are largely influenced by theoretical concerns explored in his sculpture *Educational Complex*, completed in 1995. This work, along with his foundational text "Architectural Non-memory Replaced with Psychic Reality" (1996), marked a point of departure for Kelley. Decidedly embracing misreadings of his previous works and crossing them with his interest in Repressed Memory Syndrome, the psychoanalytic theory that posits that memories might become hidden as a result of trauma, the artist embarked on a quest to chart his own formation as constructed by the tripartite influence of the institutions of home, church, and school. What set this project apart from Kelley's other precursory investigations, however, is his employment of space, specifically architecture and architectural tropes, as visual tactics *and* instruments for representing and tracking the failures of memory and spatial habituation.

These failures manifested in *Educational Complex* as closed-off, white boxes alongside the intricate architectural reconstructions of his childhood home, the church he frequented, and every school he attended throughout his life. In

doing so, Kelley set himself up for a future exploration of those enclosed boxes, and would devote a majority of his practice to their metaphorical re-opening. What resulted was manifold and multifarious, and would spawn equally rich and complex discussions of his work that continue through the present. In light of the numerous political, social, technological, spatial, and economic developments that have taken place in the decade since Kelley's passing, several questions arising from his explorations deserve, or even demand, thoughtful reapplication from us today: how is the individual, and society at large, shaped by institutional and structural spaces and our memories thereof? If our identities are formed by these spaces, then what happens to us, both individually and collectively, once our memories of them become obscured? And how does the intersection of memory and space correlate to how we portray, reconstruct, or re-imagine these spaces, and, our *selves*?

These questions are at the root of Mike Kelley's works in *Nonmemory*. Placed in dialogue with works by living artists whose diverse and varied approaches generate a new criticality and urgency to these specific preoccupations, these artists also raise further questions that go beyond Kelley's own. Naturally, this exhibition serves as merely one proposal in response to one important area of concern within Kelley's practice, leaving open myriad other possible inquiries. On the whole, this is arguably the foundation on which Kelley's practice exists: to produce a work, generate a response, and then to embrace and react to that response so that it informs and instructs a subsequent response, stopping just short of any resolution. In his absence, we have chosen to use this part of his practice, and the specific works on view, not only to sustain the uniquely generative and conductive quality of this artist, but also to address social and spatial issues that have become even more prescient today.

# Exhibition Views:

**Nonmemory, Hauser & Wirth  
Los Angeles, 2023**



FEATURED WORKS  
Mike Kelley, Olivia Erlanger

FEATURED WORKS  
Meriem Bennani, Mike Kelley

FEATURED WORKS  
Olivia Erlanger, Mike Kelley

FEATURED WORKS  
Raúl de Nieves, Max Hooper Schneider, Mike Kelley





**FEATURED WORKS**  
Max Hooper Schneider, Raúl de Nieves

**FEATURED WORKS**  
Kelly Akashi, Mike Kelley, Beatriz Cortez

**FEATURED WORKS**  
Mike Kelley, Beatriz Cortez, Lauren Halsey

**FEATURED WORKS**  
Mike Kelley



FEATURED WORKS  
Lauren Halsey

FEATURED WORKS  
Mike Kelley, Olivia Erlanger



Installation view, *Mike Kelley: Toward a Utopian Arts Complex*, Metro Pictures, New York, N.Y., USA, 1995

# Interview:

## Kelly Akashi (KAK) & Kathryn Andrews (KAN)

KAN: I'm curious in your formation as an artist how much you thought about the work of Mike Kelley? I'm sure that, coming up in Los Angeles, you saw it around. I wonder if it was very important to you? Or was it more on the periphery of your consciousness?

KAK: What's always been most interesting to me about Mike Kelley as an artist has been his use of writing alongside his practice. I think in general I'm drawn to artists who develop a complex practice that includes writing as another outlet for their ideas... artists who work with language to frame or multiply readings of their work. Mike talked about how at one point in his life, he didn't want to be an authority on his work. He didn't want to put a lot of language on it, out of concern that it would direct or limit the ways in which it was read. But then he found that writers would just bounce off of each other, regurgitating the same ideas around his practice, which became very narrow. And so, he felt like he had to write about his work in order to open up the read. He also realized that nobody really considered him an authority. Typically, the artist's read of their own work isn't privileged. So, Mike thought, well, at least I can provide another perspective on it since everyone else is just saying the same thing. It's something I struggled with a lot as a younger artist: how much language do I want to put on my own work? So it was really helpful to understand and learn this through him.

KAN: You struggled with the language being put on your work? Or with putting language to it yourself?

KAK: Exactly what he was saying. How much language, or how much control, do you try to exert over the read of your own work? How much do you tell people? How much superfluous information do you provide beyond the work itself and beyond the conventions of art? When you title a work, for example, it's a convention, but it can also be a negotiation with the bigger system, right?

I never knew him, but I can only imagine that he must have had a lot of energy to not only produce the way he did, but also to be able to utilize and really play around with all the structures and apparatuses surrounding artistic production.

KAN: Yeah. It is remarkable when you think about how much he produced. I'm always surprised by the acuity, the adeptness, the ease with which he could consume any aesthetic and then regurgitate it at a very high level. He had such a brilliant way of taking in something and then spitting it back out in a very convincing, digested way, as if it came from him naturally.

KAK: Yeah. Artists have been dealing with this for a while. But more recently, because of social media, there's online branding that artists have to increasingly deal with alongside the work they produce. Some of that can be an aesthetic branding, not only manufacturing but really owning an aesthetic, because that's a path to recognition and visibility. In regards to what you're saying, it's obviously a different time than when Mike was working. But it's still not common for an artist to be able to appropriate an aesthetic, or a style, or a cultural language in a way that isn't just branding or product oriented. I don't see many artists today appropriating aesthetics to unpack the visual language of the cultures they come from, to get at root messages that are embedded in those visual languages and systems.

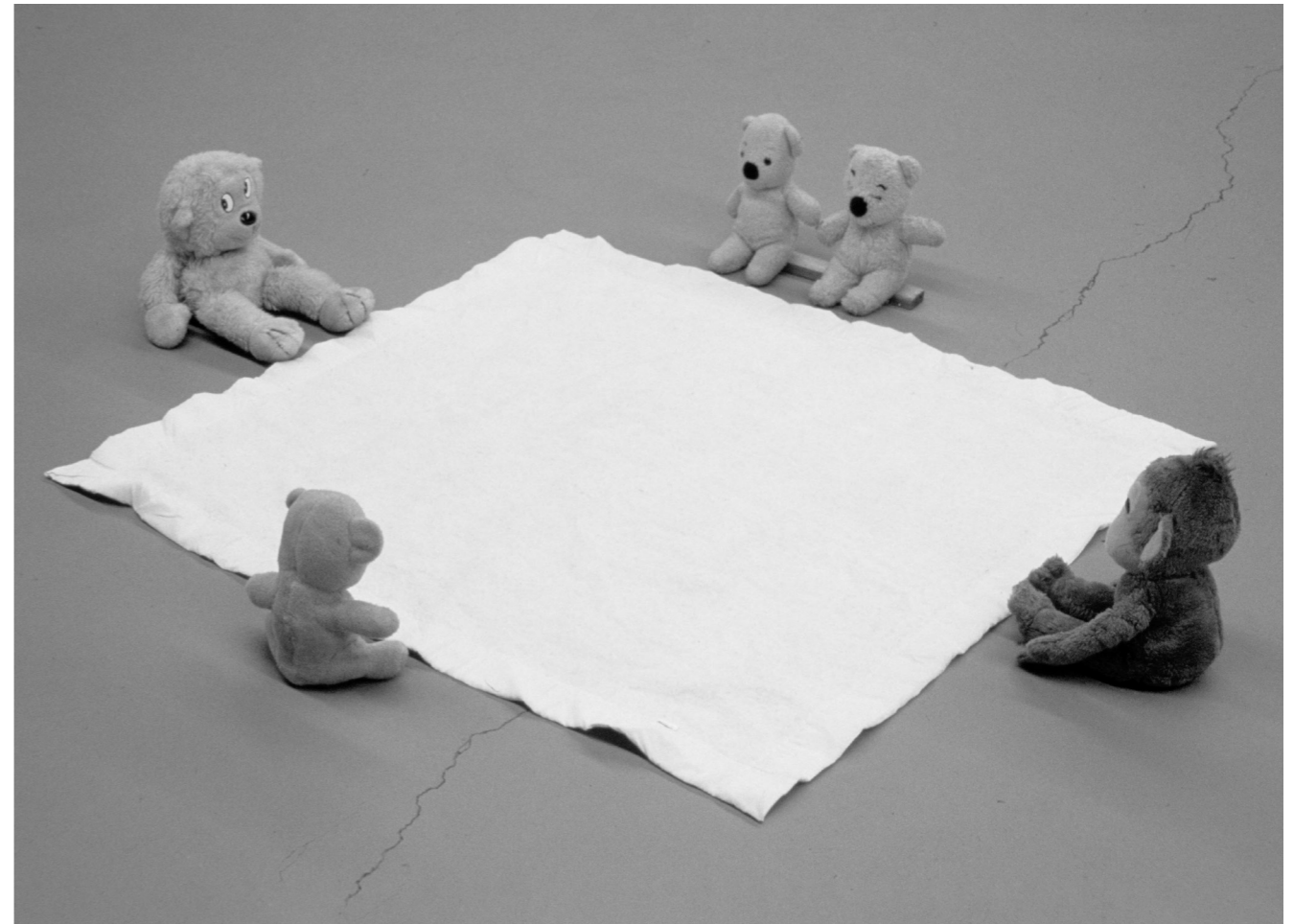
KAN: Yeah, Mike definitely came up in a very different time than this sort of post-internet, post-rise-of-the-art-fair moment where there's a hyper focus on simplification to increase recognizability. I'm talking about what artists make, and how artists have moved toward having an awareness of how their output functions in a marketplace that's oversaturated with images, branded objects, and whatnot. I feel like Mike was able to sidestep a lot of that because, historically speaking, of where he was. It was more about how an artist can move away from a very traditional idea of what artists do and can be. He was exploding Hans Hofmann high modernism, but with some kind of absurd Bataille-esque or Beckett-loving nukes. Let's blow it up!

KAK: Yeah totally. I was born in 1983, so I think of myself as being on the millennial side of the Gen X-millennial cusp. I remember thinking Gen X was very anti-branding and skeptical of corporations. Then the millennials just embraced the value of corporate branding and accepted it. I see Gen Z embracing it even more, especially through social media.

When you say post internet, I always think that's an interesting label... we're so social media saturated now, which is this whole other cultural phenomena that is, to me, even more oriented towards branding, creating quick messages, or relaying things quickly.

I like what you were talking about because when I was younger I was very afraid of elevator pitches. I was against this idea of somebody being able to distill a multi-decade practice, something somebody's poured a lot of energy and thought and ideas into, down to a single sentence. And what you're saying now is that the elevator pitch has turned into an image—a single image that needs to carry the same strength as what I used to worry those pitches had to carry.

It's a bigger cultural question. Why has all of society brainwashed everybody into thinking this is a good idea? Maybe it's just a speed thing.



There's a general speed shift that's happened that nobody's really in control of, and that everyone's trying to navigate in different ways.

KAN: Yeah. That's interesting. When I think about Mike, I feel like part of what he was questioning was an individual's relationship to the cultural ether... the operating aesthetics in the environment at large. Like what we're brainwashed with, what we're receiving. How do we make sense of our own identities in relation to all the signifiers operating around us?

What was so unique about Mike, his real genius, was his ability to break down the world into an infinite number of categories, and then to understand the connections between them, while exploring what individuality can be in relation to each of those categories or realms or... ways of being.

It's a very linguistically-driven enterprise. It's about codification, categorization, typologies. It's also about modeling ways to find freedom, or movement, within those structures with all their traps and constrictions.

To return to your work, I'm really curious about its relationship to language and what I have noticed as a pointed resistance to participating in any of those kinds of games... I'll call them games.

KAK: Yeah. I have a pretty earnest approach to how I use language and its relationship to my

work. Mike was just a completely different person in the world than I am. I don't tend to think of myself as the kind of person that the world gives that much freedom to.

My ability to be taken seriously as an artist... society just doesn't have the same framework for me that it would have for somebody like him. I've often felt like I didn't even have the privilege to play with those mediums because I had to prove myself more.

KAN: Because Mike was a white man from mainstream America?

KAK: Yes.

KAN: And it was a given that he could enter power structures because of his identity?

KAK: Yes. Looking back, it's something you feel when you see his *Memory Ware* or *Arenas* series (where he worked with stuffed animals) (Fig. 1). He was a sculptor working with craft. Being a woman working in sculpture and working with craft, there is a larger societal assumption or baggage that comes with that. Whereas Mike is afforded a critical distance, and there's automatically assumed to be a layer of critical engagement. Because society doesn't place an obvious connection between men and that kind of work.

FIGURE 1:  
Mike Kelley, *Arena #7 (Bears)*, 1990

KAN: Women weren't allowed to participate in the fine art realm, except...

KAK: Through craft, yeah.

KAN: When a man makes craft, it's seen as rebellious. When a woman makes craft, it's seen as normal. And it's therefore harder to transgress in this secondary "category" that's not been valued in the same way as fine art.

KAK: Regarding apparatuses or structures around art, I feel like historically men have been given more freedom to play with those structures. Whereas I often have to use those structures to prove my ability to be taken seriously. I have to work harder to say, for instance, "No, this isn't Wiccan." I used to get that question a lot! I do have an interest in how spaces can be charged, and in the way that somebody who practices different kinds of spiritual beliefs might have an interest in and use for those charged spaces. But I'm using mine for a different purpose.

KAN: I think to reconsider Mike's work at this moment—when identity has shifted to the center of the conversation about most contemporary art-making—this is interesting. Though Mike often cited his Irish Catholic upbringing, pointing to what it meant to come out of a certain context, he did that in an extreme way that was pretty much farce...

While I agree with you, I think Mike too was really struggling with the viewer's desire to label him... to put things in boxes, to categorize for the sake of knowing, to tie meaning up with a tidy bow.

What does it mean for a person to have a relationship to what can't be known or understood? For me, that's one of the more interesting questions that I see Mike asking.

KAK: Mm-hmm.

KAN: With *Educational Complex*, for example, there's a reaction against meanings assigned to his earlier works. Take the *Arena* series, which viewers speculated to be about trauma—perhaps abuse, or even molestation. Mike, frustrated by these projections, responded by creating a masterwork with large voids, forcing the point: "You want to project? Here's something to project onto."

I see him really grappling with how we don't have a fixed relationship to our own identity. He's coming to terms with the many ways it's unfixable. And he's hereby created a playground in which he can try on many new identity constructs.

That is where I really begin to think about the connections to your work. One of the challenges of this moment we're in is navigating how a certain identity is impressed upon us, whether we identify with it or not. We "inherit" these sit-

uations that we have no given relationship to. I think the word "inheritance" is a place where you and Mike have some very interesting overlap.

I know that in some of your works you are responding to sites where the U.S. government forcibly relocated and interned your family during World War II. What does it mean for you to comment upon that inherited identity? Is that of interest to you or is carrying that identity something you're reacting against?

KAK: Life is an accumulation of a lot of experiences... even when you're really young. And some of those are suppressed. So it's hard to have any fixed notion of identity. People are constantly expanding and changing.

Even with the work I make now, there are people who read my perceived heritage into my work, whether it's there or not. The idea of me not having to grapple with a perceived identity by others is not something I'm afforded, ever. It's not something I've been able to ever circumvent or play with, because people will just apply it anyway.

When it comes to returning to the internment camps, there are a lot of reasons for why I made that work. One reason was just that it was the right time in my life. In relationship to my practice, I was looking at and working with geology in the year preceding that research. To me, there's a kind of psychological or ancestral geological excavation happening in that work. The research extends from working with geology and consequently the parallels I drew between geological formations and human formation. The internment is something that happened in my family, something I knew and felt, but didn't have a lot of language surrounding it. It wasn't an experience that was verbally shared or talked about often.

These experiences happen within many families. There is a struggle to inherit those lapses in your family history... to figure out how to access that information and how to reconcile it. I came to this idea that I needed to focus on that search, and not some conclusion. It's not a product that's being created, or an object, or traditional story. It's not one fixed thing to be found that will end the journey. You start to look at the search, the journey, as the whole thing: the struggle to try to understand what it means and unpack it over time in a multitude of ways... that's really the answer to that query. Like Mike, it's more about not trying to simplify it, but allowing it to be complex.

I think that's why I have difficulty trying to pin things down with language. I've started enjoying using language to describe the materials that come together, while still allowing space for all that can't be known.

KAN: I was thinking of different works of yours as accumulations, or combinations, with resonances that have much to do with poetry. Or,





FIGURE 2:  
Mike Kelley, *Garbage  
Drawing #1*, 1988

FIGURE 3:  
Mike Kelley, *Garbage  
Drawing #34*, 1988

logic, blow up all the rigid worlds. Mike began making a free for all.

I am curious, in your work, how you think about that? What for you are the means by which you blow up your own bell jar?

KAK: When I'm making work, I'm not just looking at one work. I'm thinking about how it relates to other works as a root system. Maybe similar to Mike, there are different paths of works that come together and then split apart again. I'm still building those systems, but instead of trying to materially manifest a singular path of thought, I like to think about how they can loop around, merge, and separate again.

KAN: I get the sense that one of your interests is mining how suggestions of geology or sediment speak to the passage of time. And that this story about what your family went through is not so much about you, but rather it's just another story in the greater arc of human experience. Another layer in a deep history of layers. The human and the nonhuman coming into contact and commingling, literally exchanging materiality in different ways, and settling down into one mass.

KAK: We talked a little earlier about the speed of things these days... I don't feel like the world allows for a lot of unstructured time, or it's not really a thing that the world wants to cultivate. There's a push to communicate things quickly and efficiently.

By accumulating objects that have known and unknown values attached to them, one can better create an archive of materials and narratives that are nuanced and have forms of value that can only be understood through time. These kinds of value can be very personal, and stumbled upon unintentionally.

I think of microfiche, which has been tossed out as a method for accessing newspaper archives. In it, I could read the article, of course, but I could also see the advertisements — for what movies were being shown at the time this event happened, for example. One could stumble upon additional context.

KAN: Ways of seeing history.

KAK: That can be really valuable, being able to access a personal account that's lost forever because it wasn't ascribed value.

KAN: That makes me wonder about some of Mike's early works, the *Garbage Drawings* (1988) (Fig. 2, 3), where he was trying to make sense of what it meant to represent something that really has no value. And then his last works, the blobby *Kandor* sculptures that are pretty abstract; he's just completed a massive series of rigid forms that are geometrical and fastidious, and then he shifts to forms that are

looser and more odd, less referential and more nonsensical.

Mike was a master at framing things, and I love those works that just become so strange. They exceed codification. In that, I see a connection to what you're talking about. Is there a place where we can value this kind of nothingness?

KAK: Things that can't be identified, things that can't be codified.

KAN: "Garbage."

KAK: But I don't think there's anything that's nothing. Everything has baggage. Even trash has baggage! You have the baggage of it being trash, so then you're dealing with that.

The whole time we've been talking, I've been asking myself, what is nothing? To me, the biggest "nothings" are intangible things like emotion. There are artists that work with emotion. Mike was one of them, trying to play with empathy. We talked about that before, trying to understand what empathy means in relationship to objects.

KAN: I was thinking in Mike's case, he used seriality to achieve an idea of nothingness: by repeating a thing so many times that it starts to suggest the idea of not being itself.

KAK: I keep thinking about creating a bigger trajectory or positioning around the same idea, so that it's not pinned down through one kind of approach, material, or visual language. Rather, it's constantly reapproached through time, because it's an important idea that he is working through. I guess I could think about if I were re-approaching the same thing over and over, it would turn into nothing. But if I spend time thinking about the differences in each approach, then it becomes a lot of something.

KAN: I see it in your work a bit, for example, in the sculpture you made of yourself in stone, the one with flowers (Fig. 4). All of the materials evoke different durations. The flowers are living and passing. There's your body, but in a material that's much more permanent. The living Kelly is cited and then there's an idea of you being returned to the earth, as bodies are. There's a mix of timeliness and timelessness... multiple periods co-existing.

KAK: Yeah, for sure.

KAN: I think of it as being a kind of emptying out, or at least it points to a passage of time and a question about the self. What's the role of the self? Where does a self go?

FIGURE 4:  
Kelly Akashi, *Long Exposure*, 2022

some kind of communication that's sidestepping spelling things out in a literal way. A system that's perhaps slowing meaning making.

KAK: Totally.

KAN: There seems to be a profound connection between some of Mike's interests and exactly what you're talking about. You know, somewhere he says he's not so into Superman as a character, but he chose to go deeply into that story in his *Kandors* series because Superman is tasked with tending Kandor. Bad guy Brainiac has captured the city and shrunk it down; Superman has wrested it back, but now he's tethered to it. Kandor is permanently in his care.

I thought that's perhaps a core idea of Mike's work: the conundrum of always being marked by your point of origin and the problem of what to do with it. Can you escape it? Can you play with it? Can you enlarge it? Do you smash its container? I'm left with the infinite illustrations of what Kandor might be... these are Mike's answers. And then, after making several bodies of work, he began to take on the question: what does it mean to actually smash the bell jar?

At the end, when he began to take works from one series and mix them up with another, that was his way of smashing everything. Like, we're going to take all the codes, all the systems, and begin to just fuck them up... cross pollinate them. We're going to blow up reason, blow up



KAK: People have different words for it. Like entropy, or impermanence. I always say chaos. Emptying is a hard term for me because I'm aware that the sculpture has a relationship to funerary monuments, and also classical sculpture since it's a body carved out of marble. My body isn't one of those kinds of idealized bodies. Though that's not the point of the project, it's an important thing to acknowledge about it too.

I like to utilize the baggage that I carry in the work and let it be an entry point. And I just don't feel like any of it is empty. In fact it's actually the opposite. It's a lot.

KAN: It's interesting to hear you talk about that, and it does make sense to me with the way that you use materials. The different forms are all made from hyper-specific stuff. There is a system operating. This form is a very particular material here, and that one there contrasts. And they're all coming from the natural world somehow or at least suggesting it. So it makes sense to me that you might talk about things being filled...

KAK: Filled up.

KAN: Or embodied. I suppose the core question that I want to conclude with (and this is a question I have for every artist) is what kind of a self is being constructed here?

KAK: What kind of a self do you mean? Do you mean me making an idea of the artist as a self and trying to put that in the work so that people read a kind of selfhood in it? Or do you mean me constructing myself as an individual in the world?

KAN: There are many ways one can talk about how selves are suggested by artworks and art practices. I think what I was trying to say about Mike earlier was, despite his acute awareness of so many aesthetic systems, and his purposely perverse citations of them—revealing how they permeate every nook and cranny of high and low culture—is that he still saw art as a space with room for resistance. And this resistance for him was undeniably linked to play: modeling the various garbage piles, modeling the various possibilities for Kandor, exploding the idea of things like, say, a sculpture base. Taking a particular character and putting it in situations that are completely absurd, over the top, nonsensical.

If I were to do some kind of essentializing, I would put forth that Mike was arguing for a self that has the space to play joyously, vigorously, divorced from all care. A self that's untethered from relationships and cultures that we don't choose.

It's a theoretical plea for, despite these crazy systems that we're born into, a self that's truly free, becoming... one that can become anything.

KAK: Making art is important because art offers a space to have certain kinds of conversations that society at large doesn't really permit the time for. And so, for me, the freedom to have these conversations is the reason to produce artworks. But I also look at materials like bronze and glass and other ancient objects where the importance of a singular author is not relevant. I hope some of these works will be around in 5,000 years and I imagine that at that point almost all of our stories, no matter how important any of us are, will be lost. In geological time, that's not even that long from now.

I analyze my visual vocabulary by materializing structures, combining found and constructed objects, and taking time to process how those objects and structures are built into my mental formations. I project this visual language into the artworks in order to communicate with people. By constantly looping back on what I think and how I see, I both create new forms and transform myself continuously.

KAN: I like this idea of liberation through connectedness to time or being inconsequential in relation to it.

KAK: I think accepting that time will destroy everything is liberating. It scares a lot of people, but to me it shows how important every action is now because with freedom comes a lot of responsibility. I feel very responsible for the things I do and say as a result of accepting the totalizing impact of time and entropy.

KAN: That's a good end.

KAK: Yeah, I don't think we can talk about that. It's just...ha ha.



Installation view, *Kandors*: Mike Kelley, Jablonka Galerie, Berlin, Germany, 2007