

TEXTE ZUR KUNST

A Hole, but a Flattened Down Hole

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A sense of complete and utter loss, doubly hollowed out – this forms the communal emotional valence through which I first approached the last piece that Mike Kelley installed, “Mechanical Toy Guts” (1991/2012). Initially conceived during his “Arena” period, Kelley reconfigured “Mechanical Toy Guts” as his contribution to “Beneath the Valley of the Lowest Form of Music”, a historical show about the Los Angeles Free Music Society organized by The BOX, a Los Angeles art gallery. By coincidence, a previously planned day of noise performances – to include Kelley, among others – came to serve as an impromptu memorial in the wake of his suicide.

“Mechanical Toy Guts” features the bowels of some 18 mechanical stuffed toy animals, carcasses relieved of their skin to reveal the mechanized subjects beneath. Kelley separated these parts into two classes: white and black. He positioned each grouping as a floor sculpture upon one of two oppositional fields – a white rectangular blanket, its floor plan augmented by what might be taken as a wee-wee pad; and a complementary black fleece field, fragmented by a series of repetitively incised shapes, jagged breaks evoking instances of absence and abuse – following Kelley's manipulation of the materials. Additionally, two tapered legs extend toward a pair of speakers replaying the moribund voices of the eighteen animals. Kelley had mic'd the mechanical innards of the animals, physically manipulating their motorized movements and circuit-bending their voice boxes, in what adds up to a disorienting sonic morass. He positioned a plastic outdoor chair in front of the white field. This was anthropomorphized by the addition of a bunched-up lemon-yellow sock. In front of the black field Kelley placed a stacking institutional chair, below which a battered cardboard box – “Mechanical Toy Guts” scrawled on its side in sharpie – waited to be repacked and relegated once more to the chapel of the basement. Together, the chairs constituted two seats of authority – stations for the viewer to sit and overlook the two sets of depleted quasi-subjects, embodying the binary of transcendence/damnation.

“Mechanical Toy Guts” signification is multiplicitous. It intentionally aims towards irresolution, suggesting that a consideration of the site of reception as the location for the production of meaning lies at the core of Kelley's work. Through the displacement of meaning-generation, Kelley implicates the viewer in an inter-relational network of emotional contracts underwritten by social expectation. He shows how the viewer's own identification and projection unwittingly reaffirm broader cultural conventions regarding interaction based on social and emotional conditions. This reaffirmation undermines our own autonomy. As it progressively unfolds, “Mechanical Toy Guts” points to the dialogical recycling and repurposing that underlies the riposte of Kelley's entire output. Even his most ostensibly simple works, of which “Mechanical Toy Guts” would be a prime example, achieve a staggering complexity through limited means, in part by recursively appropriating cultural conventions as emotionally affective readymades.

“Mechanical Toy Guts” elicits an eerie feeling: that Kelley meant for the work to be read as a perverse coda to his entire production. As such, this artwork pins me, as a viewer, against my own speculations surrounding its relation to Kelley’s death.

Within his own writing, Kelley references the pediatrician/psychoanalyst D. W. Winnecott’s theory of the “transitional object”. In so doing, he elucidates the procedural function of his own works on the viewer. During childhood development, with the advent of the reality principle, the infant uses the transitional object – typically a security blanket or stuffed animal – as a means to master the transition between the experience of an exclusively inner world and one that acknowledges objects outside itself. As such, the infant considers the stuffed animal as neither outside itself, nor part of its inner world. Rather, it lies somewhere in between. It is just as highly cathected with narcissistic libido as it is with object-libido. By defining the transitional object as a “not-me possession”, Winnecott proposes a concept of the object that differs from its usual positive connotations either as a need-satisfying object, as an object of desire, or as a phantasm. The object is here defined as a negative of “me”, which carries implications with regard to omnipotence – in the sense that one can possess more than one’s own body, to a theoretically infinite degree. The infant employs the transitional object as a tool to mediate and postpone the immediate gratification that the mother’s breast provides. As a stand-in for this, the transitional object asserts a quasi-subjectivity that orients the child within a relational structure. Often gifted by family members and loved ones, stuffed animals, such as the kind Kelley uses, ensnare the recipient within a network of obligation that set the terms for how and when we are considered subjects. Premised on an economy of circulation rather than accumulation, the gift in turn functions as an open invoice, an implicit contract demanding reciprocity. Kelley’s tactics of withholding meaning – which echo the gift’s seeming repression of exchange value – implicate me, like all of his viewers, within a cycle of guilt and emotional debt that cannot be repaid.

Pitted against the stuffed animal as a repository of sentiment – quasi-subjective stand-ins for the perceived blank slate of childhood innocence – “Mechanical Toy Guts” evokes the pathological. Stripping the machine-manufactured objects of flesh in order to expose the simple motors that once moved them, Kelley’s eviscerations inflict a certain trauma. This revelation, underscored by the manipulated sounds of the eighteen various stuffed animals, signifies a stigmatizing violence focused not only upon unsuspecting toys, but also upon the provisional cultural imperative that we nurture the “innocent.” And yet, just as soon as I read “Mechanical Toy Guts” in this way, the piece flips on itself. It reminds me that the demand for charity does not necessarily extend to those within Kelley’s works that could be considered society’s “lower-than-low.” Kelley tempts me to categorize the exposed, less-than-human quasi-subjects of “Mechanical Toy Guts” amidst his “Lumpenprole”: the maimed, the abject, the criminal, the dregs which society’s self-image cannot accommodate.

Through its insidious hierarchies, “Mechanical Toy Guts” implicates me in a branching schema: as spectator over the travesty of childhood ritual – and artistic expression – gone awry; and, as a supervisor positioned within the institutional seat of moral authority over the outcast. As such, Kelley’s mise-en-abyme stages the continual destabilization of

hierarchical categories. Inside/outside, empowerment/disempowerment, morality/immorality, high/low, concern/neglect, and subject/object continuously renegotiate positions depending on their interrelation. By revealing the stuffed animals' underlying mechanics, Kelley suggests that empathy and identification are automated processes – either biologically or culturally automated – and, potentially, wholly artificial.

When the LAFMS show closed, its organizers decided to leave Kelley's piece up as a kind of ad hoc memorial. It continued to occupy the same small backroom of the gallery during the following exhibition, which happened to be my own. Since Kelley's work asserted a presence alongside my own show, I was placed in a position to respond to it. This led me to make "Alma" (2012). Installed in a second backroom, adjacent to the one occupied by Kelley's piece, my work and his addressed each other through a quasi interrogation window set within a wall dividing the two rooms. "Alma" also references an earlier project of my own, "Pretend You're Actually Alive" (2000-2008), which examines the complex relations between my mother and me – namely, how she used intimacy, eroticism, and vulnerability to negotiate the balance of power within our family. A promising ballerina during her early twenties, my mother, thirty years later – in response to economic and emotional needs – began to slide into thinly veiled prostitution, aggressively projecting her sexualization onto me, and by doing so intentionally subjecting the members of my family, me, and vicariously the viewer of "Pretend You're Actually Alive", to a stigmatizing confrontation. The substrate of "Alma" – a large-scale photograph of my mother, an outtake repurposed from this earlier body of work – could itself be seen as a quasi-subject. She lies on a pale-green floral duvet, peering off-camera, naked save for a pair of black stockings and high heels, one hand cradling the back of her neck, the other grasping a knee, her legs impishly spread. I printed the photograph and gave it to a 3-year-old girl named Alma. She drew directly over it with oil pastels. Her marks – made under the permission and supervision of her parents – despite their evocation of Abstract Expressionism, are unquestionably those of a child, a point indexed by the small hand and footprints (her signature) that litter the crawled-over, manipulated surface of the photograph, the vigorously smeared over face and crotch, the hairball repositioned as an eye. Like the readymade transitional objects of Kelley's series of "Arena" works (1990), Alma's drawing serves as a repository of the traces of infantile use that stain such objects. Alma's "innocent" mark-making maps the child's unconditioned moral understanding of the image over the adult viewer's own morally authoritative interpretation of that same image, asserting itself, but doing so without prohibiting both perceptions to co-exist. Mapped over each other, though preserved intact, they combine to suggest in their incongruence a genealogy of moral development.

Through the aforementioned interrogation window, both Kelley's work and my own play with the commonly conflated mythologies of childhood innocence and artistic transgression. By their refusal to provide direct meaning, the works insinuate that unrestrained expression, that which might be considered dangerous to society, is relocated – through a motivated misunderstanding – to the realm of artistic sublimation. Teasing out the surplus in their incongruence, the works reflect a confusing slippage of semantically reified cultural understandings: the infant can't be labeled deviant because

he or she is not yet fully formed in relation to culture; nor can the artist, with the expressive need to lay his baggage on the viewer, be labeled innocent.

Exploiting this tension between innocence and deviance, Kelley's "Arena" works and blanket sculptures dialogically layer the tropes of Minimalist floor sculpture against the crawlspace used by the infant: a social arena upon which base narcissistic desire is played out. Kelley's riposte to Minimalism indicts both the abusive, hierarchically minded game of inclusion/exclusion embedded at the core of Modernist negation and the hypocritical moralism achieved through the repression of the nuanced differences inherent in subjectivity. Kelley's floor pieces reanimate the Minimalist object, revealing the waste that idealization creates and whose presence it further represses. They also target the stigma of gender and class contained in the craft object's failure to live up to the machine-manufactured object and, in the case of "Mechanical Toy Guts", the subject's hapless foregoing of autonomy under the apparatus of culture.

Culturally, just as we designate the individual attached to the signature as the site of expressive trauma, so we also take the symptom to reflect a particular subject rather than culture at large. Just as Kelley first conceived "Mechanical Toy Guts" (in 1991), he began to relinquish the craft object. John Welchman points out that the "motivation for this shift arrived from the psychology of his audience – whether critics, collectors or casual consumers – which was categorically unable to pose any other relation between artist and object than the suggestions that Kelley was infantile, obsessed and abusive, or had himself been abused." Kelley, in direct response to this, and with cruel precision, begins to perform a de-cathexis of his perceived attachment to the transitional object, submitting the quasi-subjectivity of stuffed animal figures to the apparatus of cultural determinism. "Mechanical Toy Guts", as well as "Craft Morphology Flow Chart" (1991) and "Empathy Displacement: Humanoid Morphology" (1992), all unsparingly submit heterogeneous craft objects to an equalizing indexical logic – invoking the archeological artifact, eugenics archives, memorial laws, and the residual trauma of each. This objectification mimics a cultural desubjectification: leaving the stuffed animal deprived of its presumed interiority. One might experience this as the emptying of value from one's own existence. If viewers formerly projected themselves onto the stuffed animals, now, through a radical repositioning of sentiment, they themselves are targeted. Seen within this framework, I become brutally aware of an authoritarian impulse implicit within Kelley's suicide, an affective by-product of its enactment. Unable to undo the identification and repetition cycles within which he was caught, Kelley ultimately forces his trauma onto us.

Each of the above-mentioned object types have been subjected to procedures – namely, Kelley's pathological abuse and rational dehumanization of his stuffed animals, Alma's act of drawing that marks my mother, and my mother's antagonistic acting out against internalized cultural models of propriety. These constitute tactical counter-expressions of omnipotence. All three cases exercise their procedures not only over objects, but also over quasi-subjects and normative cultural values alike. If, in the pictures of my mother, a taboo can be said to be broken, the viewer is implicated in a parallel reconstruction. Used as a readymade, the viewer reinstates the notion of the taboo. Likewise, if the viewer sees

Alma's act of drawing over the face and crotch as the necessary addition of a fig leaf, then a cultural demand for shame premises this desire. The act of mark-making in a coloring book is one of institutionalized learning. Subjectivity, as Judith Butler suggests, is constituted through the repetition of stylized acts in time. However, Alma's gestural expressions, not yet fully subjectivized, read along another register altogether: that of an embodied intensity, process, and affect. Alma's drawing traces an act of narcissistic infantile omnipotence over the object, in this case the image of my mother. Alma's un-self-conscious act of mark-making creates an analogue of my mother's own consciously motivated acts of destructive self-representation. This drawn-over photo – through its assertion of the pornographic – tempts a counter- or mis-identification. Like Kelley's stuffed animals, it invites viewers' projections, only to implicate them within the structures of social interaction, commodities, and desires that premise these images and within which they circulate. If the traditions of image production driven by Modernist negation and existentialism each grant us access to only one side of the mutually exclusive binary of affect/structure, then my work, like Kelley's, attempts to intertwine charged, pre-existing material within the cultural frameworks that define their meaning. Such an intertwining does not simply alienate viewers, it estranges them. In its public staging, framing the site of reception, the work itself places viewers, and their conventions, on view.

We negotiate the abstraction of our worlds – like the infant – through external objects and representations. Self-preservation hinges as much upon a logic of distinction – us versus them – as it does on its internal management. This constitutes a complex, reciprocal economy: any given representation has potential to be essentialized, overdetermined, used against us, or used to align ourselves within other representational frameworks. We instinctively remove from circulation those things that threaten to publicly reveal our private desires or out our complicity. We relocate them to a cultural blind spot. While Kelley implicated himself within his work, he refused to reaffirm cultural hierarchy either by directly fighting against it or fighting for a higher position within it. Extrapolating from Butler's notion of the performatic in queer culture – where oppressed sexual difference resists authority by mimicking it – Kelley's overidentification with affect equally indicts the high, from which he's excluded, and the low, to which he's relocated. Through a performed – rather than authentic – subjectivity, Kelley's artistic persona reweaves the oppositions of the existential and the structural. My work, similarly exploiting persona, straddles multiple understandings of the relationship with my mother. It slips between the personal and the critical in order to reveal reality as a social construction. My mother's objectification of herself – enacted through submitting me to an incestuously sexualized dynamic – in turn objectifies me as an inappropriately desiring subject. I embody this sexualized persona within my work in order to exacerbate it. As quasi-subjects, the resulting images instigate a reflection on ways in which intimacy obligates us through implicit contracts. Confronting the contradictions and instability of any subject's sexual reality as it is set within public life, my mother's behavior radically resists the institutionalization of a non-normative subject – what Herbert Marcuse termed “repressive desublimation”. Similarly, through ironic black humor, Kelley re-appropriates the identity of deviance imposed upon him in order to subvert the act of categorization. He throws it back on the culture that determines his identity. This act of

mummery – disallowing any meaning to be read at face value – casts doubt onto the reductive facades that uphold hierarchy itself. It allows that which the ideal represses to erupt from within. Continuously destabilized, it can't be integrated.

Through the process of destabilization, Kelley's works suggest the capacity of the symptom as a negative diagnostic tool. The question becomes how the perceived symptomatic is both determined by and reasserts – or can be called upon to challenge – social hierarchy. Mainstream culture's motivated deficiency for speaking to trauma leaves little space for exploring the ambivalence of subjective experience that may exceed stark categories of cultural understanding. Paradoxically, this constitutes a form of broader cultural trauma. Kelley positions himself and the viewer precisely within these problematized, liminal spaces – with no clear-cut binaries of victim/abuser, high/low, or masculine/feminine.

Kelley insinuates himself in us. We carry his trauma, just as our own comes to play a role in the reception of his work. We are cast, in all our complicity, simultaneously as author, victim, and victimizer. The same holds true for “Alma”: like the infant's transitional object, the photograph exists as a “me” at the same time that it is “not me”. The circuits between artist/subject, subject/viewer, and viewer/artist function as extensions of the object photographed, but also as extensions of the subject. All representation relies on this notion of “thirdness” – the presence of that which is not there, the excess of the material.^v Alma complicates collaborations with my mother – already a thorny circuit of subject/object relations and masochistic inversions. Beyond the dyad of my mother and myself, the viewer must recognize the complex network of relations underlying the total work – mother/viewer, viewer/myself, myself/culture, culture/my mother, the viewer/culture, Alma/her parents, the viewer/the viewed, and so on. It is around the quasi-subjectivity of the artwork that these relations convene. If we take as a given the drained-out reality of the image today – a reality that “Mechanical Toy Guts” extends to the automated functioning of the subject – it's through the reintroduction of the literal that we might reveal, as David Joselit has put it, “the complex ways that image relations imbricate human relations.”^{vi} If subjectivity is the precondition for instrumentalization, it may also be our only means beyond the impasse of the apparatus.

Driven by the sentiment surrounding Kelley's suicide – “Mechanical Toy Guts” exists as the integration and collapse of art with literal experience, a re-inscription of trauma and its intangible sentiment played out in the arena of aesthetics. Here, the reality of Kelley's death becomes inseparable from the artwork. The meanings of both depend on the site of reception. Rather than imposing a mandate reinforcing one perspective (a kind of didacticism Kelley submitted to searing parody), the point is to tactically re-appropriate a place from which we can perform a critical analysis of culture and our roles within it.

If we are looking for transcendence, “Mechanical Toy Guts”, like all of Kelley's works, offers none. This is its importance. If we are increasingly desensitized, i.e. dehumanized, by the cognitive and temporal demands placed on us, rather than simply acceptant of our alienation – a condition of depth rendered flat – Kelley's double binds make this dilemma clear. His work leads us to a more precise understanding of the complexity of materiality

and embodiment, and as a result we are reminded that our significance as subjects is not fixed but rather relies on these interrelations. This dis-affectation itself may be the prerequisite for developing autonomy. While Kelley's death remains shocking and saddening, it is not the withdrawal of a gift. The irresolution surrounding Kelley's act, and the ultimately unknowable experience of death itself, reveal the gift's surplus, the network of obligations by which we're bound.

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- ¹ John C. Welchman. *The Mike Kelleys*. Mike Kelley. London. 1999. (pg 44-93)
¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*. New York. 2008. (pg 184-193)
¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*. New York. 2008. (pg 189)
¹ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, (pg 74)
^v André Green, *On Thirdness*. André Green at the Squiggle Foundation. London (pg 39-68)
^{vi} David Joselit in conversation with the artist, 2012.