

Mary Kelly's Revolution Is Ongoing

The pioneering artist's feminist work was groundbreaking in the '70s. She never dreamed it would look just as radical half a century later.

By Sophie Haigney | Photographs by Philip Cheung | Nov. 10, 2022



Left: The artist Mary Kelly in her Los Angeles studio. Photo by Philip Cheung | Right: One of Kelly's works made with compressed dryer lint, "How to Build an Outdoor Bomb Shelter" (2016). Courtesy of the artist, Vielmetter Los Angeles, Mitchell-Innes & Nash and Pippy Houldsworth Gallery, London. Photo by Robert Wedemeyer

THE FIRST PHOTO shows five young women, lights attached to their breasts and crotches, posed defiantly in the dark. In the second image, the women, now dancing, morph into whorls of light reminiscent of Christmas trees. In the third, their bodies seem to mesh, dissolving into a radiant cloud. The time-exposed photographs were taken by the artist Mary Kelly in 2005, capturing a re-enactment she staged of a long-ago feminist protest. In 1970, Kelly and a group of fellow activists had disrupted the Miss World Contest in London — which they decried for its objectification of women — by setting off flour bombs, shooting water pistols and dancing, some of them adorned with bright, flashing bulbs. It's a moment Kelly has returned to repeatedly in her work, including for "Documenta 12" in 2007, when a hundred women, their torsos illuminated, charged through a German park en masse after dark.

Kelly's photos of "Flashing Nipple Remix" (2005) are now on display at the [Maria & Alberto de la Cruz Art Gallery](#) at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., through Dec. 11. Looking at them today, it's hard not to see them as akin to a memorial, ghostly images of a movement whose record of accomplishments seems, at this moment in history, to be fading. The young women who participated in the restagings almost two decades ago had similar reactions. They "thought it was amazing that we could ever have asked for free child care for all, or abortion on demand," Kelly said, "because that still was not realized."

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This past August, two months after the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, Kelly and I sat in her Los Angeles backyard at a table overlooking the pool where she swims laps. Now 81, she was soft-spoken and poised, her hair swept into an elegant updo. As she laid out plates of snacks and poured small glasses of chardonnay — it is a “feminist imperative,” she said, to embrace pleasure — she told me that the impacts of the women’s movement, the enduring theme of her work for more than half a century, had been on her mind. “Since so many of the demands have not been met, what is the legacy?” she asked calmly. “What’s left?” The rollback of abortion protections is something she never could have imagined after the gains of the 1970s, and the attack on reproductive freedoms horrifies her. But Kelly herself is not despairing — she noted that she never could have predicted the #MeToo movement, either. She considers history in context, describing incremental change on a geological scale. “The older I get, and the more we recognize the huge crises like climate change,” she said, “the more I see this as just a very brief period of time.”

KELLY FIRST CAME to prominence in the 1970s with a practice that was both highly conceptual and unapologetically political. Though she was known as a socialist who tried to unionize artists alongside factory workers, and as a boundary pusher who brought feminism to the testosterone-driven realm of conceptual art, arguably the most radical aspect of her work, especially in its early years, was its insistence that maternity and domesticity were worthy subjects of serious creative expression. At a time when many conceptual artists were focused on violence and transgression — [Chris Burden](#) dragging his half-naked body across a parking lot strewn with glass; [Paul McCarthy](#) smearing himself with paint, ketchup, mayonnaise, raw meat and feces — Kelly’s early work was almost understated and excruciatingly intimate, with an emphasis on motherhood, pregnancy and reproductive sexuality. While some feminist writers addressed these topics, too, most feminist visual artists at the time were focused on other subject matter: The so-called Pictures Generation in New York was repurposing and appropriating mass media, exploring how culture represented bodies and gender; [Martha Rosler](#) was collaging images from *Playboy* into news photographs to protest the war in Vietnam; [Judith Bernstein](#) was making waves by drawing phalluses over and over; and [Jenny Holzer](#) was papering her “Truisms” around Manhattan. Kelly’s introspective, conceptual approach made her an anomaly.



Works in progress in Kelly's home studio. | Philip Cheung

Born in 1941 in Fort Dodge, Iowa, and mostly raised in a small town in Minnesota, Kelly came from a background that she describes as “loosely Catholic” and modest — six people living in an 800-square-foot house. From an early age, she painted and drew; as a fourth grader, she was commissioned to create a Nativity scene by a local church. She was fascinated by the beatniks and their travels, and craved culture and education. Later, she got a scholarship through the Catholic Church to study painting in Florence, Italy, where one of her tutors recommended her for a job teaching studio art in Beirut, Lebanon. “I was only 22, but I jumped on it,” she said. It was there that she discovered a new kind of political consciousness, one that became enmeshed with her feelings about gender. “In Beirut there was this long view of colonial history,” Kelly said. She stayed in the country through the Six Day War, even as most Americans fled, and then moved to London in 1968, drawn by the city’s budding conceptual art scene.

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Studying at St. Martin's School of Art, she became involved in the leftist student movements of the era. She met her partner, the artist Ray Barrie, who was a fellow student, when she saw one of his sculptures and felt she had to know who made it; they have been together ever since. For the first seven years of their relationship, Kelly and Barrie lived in a sort of urban commune in Pimlico that was run by women and “whoever we happened to want to be living with at the time,” Kelly said. “It was the very beginning of the women’s movement. It was like the wives and girlfriends of the New Left Review decamped to their own separate organization. Women [were] recognizing that we wanted more of a role than photocopying fliers — or no, then it was operating a mimeograph machine.”

Collective living was a social experiment — shared child care, shared meal prep (Kelly remembers eating a lot of mackerel) — and one connected to the storm of political organizing brewing in London at the time. In 1973, Kelly became the first chairwoman of the Artists’ Union, a group seeking to align itself with the trade union movement. While the Trades Union Congress ultimately turned the artists down for affiliation, and the Artists’ Union more or less fell apart, organizing became part of Kelly’s artistic practice, the most direct example of which is “Nightcleaners,” a seminal avant-garde documentary that she filmed with members of Berwick Street Film Collective between 1970 and 1975. The film includes interviews with women who cleaned London offices after hours and depicts their daily routines — dropping off children at school, washing up, shopping, preparing dinner, then going out to mop floors and empty trash cans. It highlighted their low pay, as well as the psychological and physical consequences of such labor. “The reason you come to work at night is because you’ve got children, schoolchildren,” one of the subjects tells Kelly in the film. “You’re not just doing it for the fun of it ... it’s for getting a little extra to put on the table, to clothe our children.”



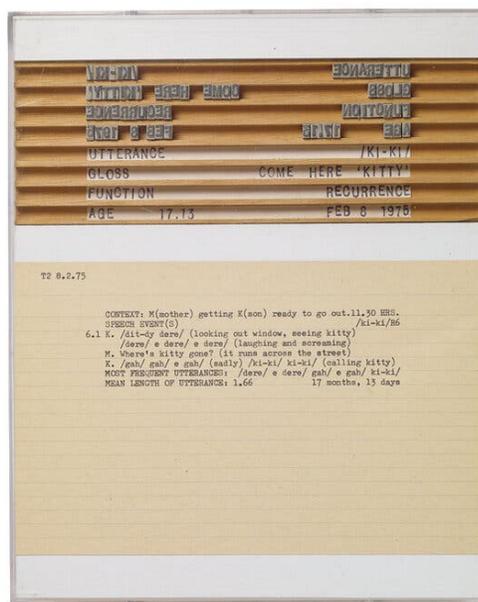
A detail of “Interim, Part I: Corpus” (1984-85). Courtesy of the artist and Vielmetter Los Angeles. Photo: Jeff McLane

It was while shooting “Nightcleaners” and documenting the campaign for equal pay at a local factory that Kelly noticed that although the men discussed their professions, the women talked more about what they did at home, and especially about their kids. In 1973, when Kelly learned she was pregnant, she became determined to examine this relationship between mother and child.

Kelly’s “Antepartum,” a looped 90-second video, shows an abdomen rising and falling in a single close-up shot; it is her stomach at nearly full term. At times, her hands appear in the frame, and the movements of the fetus are visible underneath her skin. Her first widely seen work, it’s so striking in its intimacy that one is tempted to turn away. Kelly made the piece the same year the Supreme Court issued its ruling in *Roe v. Wade*, legalizing abortion in the United States, and it forces the viewer to take an almost uncomfortably close look at the sometimes shocking physical realities of pregnancy. The corporeal and psychological onus of carrying a baby to term — whether joyfully or unwillingly — was something, said Kelly, that “no one was talking about at the time.”

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In London, after her son, Kelly Barrie, was born, Kelly began something of a sequel to “Antepartum,” a monumental undertaking that remains her best-known work: “Post-Partum Document” (1973-79) tracks her experiences during the first six years of her son’s life through recordings, autobiographical writing (“warts-and-all diary-style,” Kelly calls it), crayon scribbles, diagrams, feeding charts, transcriptions of conversations and even dirty diapers. The work is divided into six sections, 135 parts, with accompanying essays and footnotes, and like much of Kelly’s output it feels museological, even archaeological. It borrows from psychoanalysis — Jacques Lacan’s theories about language and speech — and has an insistent materiality, despite being laden with text. It also conveys ambivalence: “K’s aggressiveness has resurfaced and made me feel anxious about going to work. I can’t count the number of ‘small wounds’ I’ve got as a result of his throwing, kicking, biting, etc.,” Kelly writes. “I’m not the only object of his wrath, but I’m probably the source. Maybe I should stay at home ... but we need the money.”



Left: Kelly’s “We don’t want to set the world on fire” (2019). Courtesy of the artist, Vielmetter Los Angeles, Mitchell-Innes & Nash, and Pippy Houldsworth Gallery, London. Photo: Jeff McLane | Right: A detail from “Post-Partum Document, Part II (Analyzed Utterances and Related Speech Events)” (1975).Collection of Art Gallery of Ontario © Mary Kelly. Photo: courtesy of AGO

It’s difficult now to comprehend the sheer audacity of “Post-Partum Document,” at a time when female autobiography, women’s bodies and all aspects of child rearing have become much more common subjects for narrative art. But when the first segment was exhibited at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London in 1976, it created a sensation both in the British tabloids and in the art world. “Nappy-liners ... Used ones,” The Evening Standard wrote. “And all 22 of them can be viewed publicly in their smudged and sepia glory.”

Kelly Barrie, who is now 49 and a photographer, lives in Los Angeles, where the family moved in 1996 after Mary took a job as chair of the department of art at the University of California, Los Angeles. (She’s now at the University of Southern California, where she’s been on the faculty since 2017.) According to her, the two have a close relationship. But when I asked Kelly what her son thought about being the subject of such a widely seen, deeply personal work, she said, “That’s the one question I can never answer.” Part of the reason, she said, is because she doesn’t want to speak for him — indeed, the piece ended when he was able to write his name, becoming the author of his own experience. But it’s also because, she says, the work is not really about him. It’s about what was happening to his mother.

“Post-Partum Document” defined a certain way of creating for Kelly, one that she continues to repeat in various forms, multipart works that combine the theoretical and personal and develop over the course of years. She likes to call such works “projects,” the term connoting both something about their scale — they are massive, often unable to be exhibited in a single show — and also her long-term, iterative process. A section from another of Kelly’s projects, “Interim”

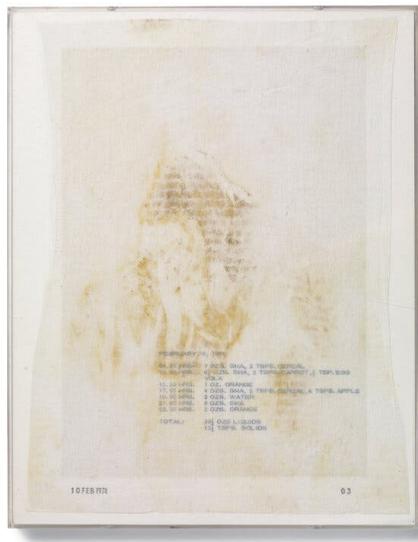
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(1990), was on view at Vielmetter Gallery in Los Angeles earlier this year. Made between 1984 and 1989 and originally shown at the New Museum in New York — where Kelly lived for seven years while teaching in the Whitney Independent Study Program — it deals with the onset of middle age. “After ‘Post-Partum Document,’ I was wondering, ‘What’s beyond reproductive sexuality?’” she says. The section exhibited at Vielmetter is titled “Corpus” and includes images of fetish objects — boots, a purse, a nightgown — staged like advertisements. The piece is multilayered in a way that’s typical of Kelly’s work, with photographs and texts that are personal but different in tone from her writing in “Post-Partum,” less like diaries and more like fables. The stories are displayed at the scale of bus stop advertisements, in Kelly’s handwriting. There are first-person scenes set in a nightclub and in a sauna with other women, and one featuring a dying mother. Some words are highlighted in lipstick red. (“That was really sexy for me,” Kelly said.) And despite the title, one never sees an actual female body; instead, it’s conjured constantly through signs and signifiers.

While Kelly attempted to move past the theme of reproduction, she didn’t, and perhaps couldn’t, put it aside altogether. In one of the texts, the narrator shares her experience in an abortion clinic, preparing to undergo the procedure and describing her anxieties to a doctor: “I rehearse it. Don’t want another child, no can’t afford another child, have professional commitments. No, that won’t impress him.” Kelly said she wanted to describe “the medical discourse around women’s bodies.” Talking about the rollback of *Roe v. Wade*, she said, “The immediate effect on the lives of women isn’t just physical — it’s enormously psychological.” And it’s the emotional component that rises to the surface here. At the end of the scene, the doctor is turning away. Kelly imagines him thinking, “Why is this woman so hysterical?”

IN 1999, KELLY came upon a new medium. She had the idea while doing the dishes one night with the television on, listening to a Black woman from South Africa speaking. It was during the time of that country’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, a courtlike restorative justice commission set up in the wake of apartheid. “She was describing how her son was killed, and I just thought about how we’re not separate from the trauma of the event and it filters through into everyday life,” Kelly said. “How do you actually show that?”

It was an intellectual problem: How to represent the way history seeps into the mundane moments of everyday existence? The solution came to her later, also at home, when she was performing another domestic chore — laundry — and looked closely at a piece of lint. With Ray Barrie, Kelly developed what would become a signature technique: using the filter screen of the dryer to cast lint into images. Kelly then pieces segments together into a kind of patchwork — the effect is hazy, blurred, a sort of visual fog that seems, in certain lights, like it might disappear. The lint works are physical evidence of domestic labor — accumulating the fuzz takes loads and loads of laundry. Visually, they function almost as a trace.



A detail from “Post-Partum Document, Part I (Analyzed Fecal Stains and Feeding Charts)” (1974). Collection of Art Gallery of Ontario © Mary Kelly. Photo: courtesy of AGO

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When I visited in August, one of the newest lint-based works was on display in Kelly's studio, which adjoins her home: "Timeline," which she worked on during the pandemic and is now hanging in the Georgetown show, recasts many of her own archival images in ethereal fluff. They are organized to resemble a timeline from a history textbook, with snippets from her letters, photographs, a diary heading from "Post-Partum Document" and sections of a leftist newspaper she once worked for in London called 7 Days. When you look closely, it becomes clear that the timeline, which is punctuated by a cartoonlike image of a doomsday clock, is neither linear nor chronological. The bits and pieces are chopped up and remixed, sometimes repeating. Time is presented as both a line and a loop, the circularity underscored by Kelly's recycling of her own past output. The piece forms a chaotic autobiography of her practice, and like her restagings, it feels particularly suited to describing our moment, in which many of the same battles are being fought all over again.

At the Georgetown show, this sense of history repeating is on full display. To create one 90-second film loop, Kelly intercut archival and contemporary images to haunting effect. In photos from the 1970s, a woman holds up a placard bearing the phrase "Unite for Women's Emancipation," which Kelly notes was actually borrowed from the suffragists. In a contemporary version of the shot, the sign instead reads, "From Stone to Cloud," referencing a Sylvia Plath poem about having a child. The switch in slogans feels emblematic of a change in feminism; the clarion call to action becomes something quieter, even as it gestures toward transformation. The works provide part of Kelly's answer to the question she's been considering: What is the legacy of the women's movement? She finds herself returning to the idea that the movement created a politics based in the personal and rooted in women's shared experiences. Her own work draws power from "the pleasure of the company of other women," she says, and her intergenerational restagings attest to that. At the opening of the exhibition in Georgetown in September — a month in which increasingly strict abortion restrictions passed in various states and the senate considered a federal ban after 15 weeks — Kelly felt compelled to stage another happening, one that provided at least a few of her compatriots a kind of cathartic release. She outfitted five young women in flashing lights and sent them running through the exhibit in the dark, screaming. "It was just so ridiculous," said Kelly, "that it was liberating."

Photo assistant: Brandon Chau