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Going Home: Mike Kelley, Mobile Rhetoric, and Detroit

Abstract

Examining the institutional narratives produced in response to the late artist Mike Kelley's *Mobile Homestead* reveals an acute tension between the process of 'going public' and the production of meaning in this autobiographical, site-specific performance. Kelley's career-defining works were built upon a foundation of *expected misunderstanding* from the public, in which Kelley manipulated public response by actively anticipating and absorbing misperception. *Mobile Homestead*, Kelley's final, unfinished work, represents a departure from this pattern, to the extent that he refused to absorb misperception within his master narrative about the project. Kelley, as 'master provocateur', adept at playing multiple roles over the course of his career, frequently masking a complex set of meanings behind a translucent veil of black humor, with *Mobile Homestead* positioned himself as transparently antagonistic to 'the institutions of the art world and community services', claiming that the failure of the project as public art constituted success as a model of his own belief that 'public art is always doomed to failure'. *Mobile Homestead* was, Kelley claimed, an exercise in 'bad faith' and, accordingly, represents the darkest version of Kelley's 'negative aesthetic'.

I chose art, not to become successful, because you couldn't make a living from being an artist at that time. It was a profession I chose specifically in order to be a failure.

- Mike Kelley (Kinney, 2012a)

Introduction

Detroit is a critical theoretical site within the American Midwest. A piece or fragment of the Midwest in some respects, Detroit is also an exception, an outlier within the American Midwestern imaginary as well as within the American imagining of the Midwest, to the extent that Detroit's amplified social, political and economic problems are consistently read as iterations of excess or lack. In terms of the art that is made in and about Detroit, it is the city's landscape which has come to provide a kind of organizing mechanism for the production and interpretation of states of being in relation to this lack and/or excess. The peculiar and unsettling features of the city's topography consistently produce aesthetic responses – some of which seek to 'document' what is here, others which seek to negotiate 'being' here as a form of artmaking, and still others that seek to intentionally transform, improve or 'revitalize' that which is here *as art*.

With regard to the corresponding narratives that attempt to explain this place, govern this place, make an example of this place on local and national levels, Detroit's excessive lack has had the ability to exert, on the one hand, extreme gravitational force (which produces entropy) and, on the other hand, a kind of radical mobility (which gives rise to weightlessness). Operating from the premise that contemporary art made within and/or about the city consistently interacts, critically and theoretically, with the narratives that are productive of Detroit-as-place, this paper seeks to examine one recent project, Mike Kelley's *Mobile Homestead*, which simultaneously engages with and rejects the real and imagined geographies of Detroit.

Mobile Homestead

Mobile Homestead is a reconstructed fragment of Mike Kelley's childhood home. 'A façade of his house—a sort of detachable face, about the size of a mobile home, that can be placed on and off a truck' (Kinney, 2012a), the *Homestead* was taken on tour through the Detroit metro area in 2010, with support from the London-based arts funding organization Artangel and the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (MOCAD). Artifacts from *Mobile Homestead*, including three documentary films associated with the project, were also part of the 2012 Whitney Biennial. The idea for the project, however, dates back at least as far as 2005-6 (Artangel, 2012), when Kelley began discussing his personal desire to purchase the actual property in the Detroit suburb of Westland where he grew up. Sources explain that Kelley's original desire to buy his childhood home was entirely personal – not a part of an art project *per se* (Kinney, 2012b; Roussel, 2012b). But when he discovered that he would not be able to buy the actual property (and it has not been established whether the current owner simply refused to sell outright, or whether Kelley would not offer a price at which the owner would sell), with encouragement from Artangel, Kelley's private interest began to transform into a public art project (Kinney, 2012a).

However, as Kelley himself explains in the 2012 Whitney Biennial catalog, 'going public led to a nightmare of complexity, not only in the production of the work but also, personally, in its very meaning for me' (Kelley, 2012).

Sifting through the various publications describing *Mobile Homestead* from the MOCAD, Artangel, and Kelley, himself, one can begin to pick up on the 'nightmare of complexity' as Kelley describes it, and the relationship between 'going public' and the production of meaning. A press release from the MOCAD interprets *Mobile Homestead* in the most explicitly geo-political terms:

In a largely disinvested city with many abandoned houses and dilapidated buildings, *Mobile Homestead* enacts a reversal of the 'white flight' that took place in Detroit following the inner city race riots of the 1960s. It does so at a time when the city is exploring new options of renewal by

assessing its singular post-industrial conditions in an attempt to articulate a new model for American cities.

The sculpture which almost exactly replicates the vernacular architecture of working class neighborhoods in the American Midwest, brings the suburbs back into the city, and as it travels – on specific missions – the mobile home performs various kinds of community services, establishing a permanent dialogue with the community that houses it. (MOCAD, 2010)

The Artangel Press release retains the narrative about 'community', with less investment in Detroit or in the American Midwest specifically, and increased attention on the tension between public and private at work in the project:

Kelley envisioned the ground floor of the homestead functioning as an open space for diverse community activities. At the same time, he designed a labyrinthine basement complex for more covert activities – what he called 'private rites of an aesthetic nature'. The completed *Mobile Homestead* will house these co-existing public and private functions mindful of Kelley's typically challenging contention that 'one always has to hide one's true desires and beliefs behind a façade of socially acceptable lies'. (Artangel, 2012)

And yet, in his essay printed in the Whitney Biennial catalog, Kelley expresses such pointed dissatisfaction with *Mobile Homestead* as an object or idea related to 'community' in any meaningful way, that he is forced to assert an outright rejection of public art at-large:

As public art, intended to have some sort of positive effect on the community in proximity to it, [*Mobile Homestead*] is a total failure. Detroit is a poor city, and I don't believe that the funding exists to organize the social programs associated with the project or to even cover its operating costs ... Turning my childhood home into an 'art gallery/community center' was simply a sign for social concern, performed in bad faith ... The failure of the *Mobile Homestead* project now, after being filtered through the institutions of the art world and community services, is successful as a model of my own belief that public art is always doomed to failure because of its passive-aggressive nature. Public art is a pleasure that is forced upon a public that, in most cases, finds no pleasure in it. (Kelley, 2012)

On the surface of his critique, it would seem that Kelley is simply aligned with participatory art's critics, like Claire Bishop, who suggests that 'the better examples of participatory art in recent years ... have constituted a critique of participatory art, rather than upholding an unproblematic equation between artistic and political inclusion' (2012: 283). The MOCAD press release, however, unproblematically situates *Mobile Homestead* within the broader narrative of revitalization in the city. Positing that Kelley's architectural fragment and its

associated performance (in which the sculpture is driven through various parts of the metro Detroit area) constitute an animation of the 'reversal of white flight', the MOCAD press release expresses a seemingly naïve sentiment. The MOCAD press release then broadens this sentiment to claim that *Mobile Homestead* serves as a model for other American cities interested in projects of renewal, to the extent that *Mobile Homestead* 'performs various kinds of community services, establishing a permanent dialogue with the community that houses it'. Countering this utopian sentiment directly, Kelley suggests not only that *Mobile Homestead* does *not* perform any kind of community service, but that any such public art is only 'doomed to failure'.

The tension between the language of the MOCAD press release, and Kelley's essay in the Biennial catalog, which is mediated but not resolved by the Artangel press release, exposes what Bishop describes as participatory art's 'double ontological status':

it is both an event in the world, and at one remove from it. As such, it has the capacity to communicate on two levels – to participants and to spectators – the paradoxes that are repressed in everyday discourse, and to elicit perverse, disturbing and pleasurable experiences that enlarge our capacity to imagine the world and our relations anew. (2012: 284)

But Bishop presents this possibility for participatory art with a caveat: there must be a 'mediating third term – an object, image, story, film, even a spectacle – that permits this experience to have a purchase on the public imaginary' (2012: 284).

In the wake of Kelley's tragic death by suicide in January 2012, before the project was seen to completion, *Mobile Homestead* and the inherent (and efficacious, we would argue) contradictions in the narratives associated with the project are at risk of becoming neutralized. If Kelley's partial house and the performances and films associated with *Mobile Homestead* constitute the archival 'third terms' which mediate the experience for participants and spectators, thereby endowing the project with the potential to communicate on multiple levels, Kelley's passing, and passing prior to the completion of the project, potentially interferes with the inherent complexity associated with the work. In other words, it is only through the maintenance of tension between the *Mobile Homestead* sculpture, performance ephemera and competing/conflicting institutional narratives which seek to define the meaning of the material and immaterial qualities of the work, that the work's potential can be fully realized. If the MOCAD narrative comes to dominate and define the parameters of interpretation for *Mobile Homestead*, the project may simply become the instrument of a rather provincial understanding of 'community' or 'participatory' art. On the other hand, if Kelley's mordant essay comes to define the legacy of *Mobile Homestead*, the project may only be read as a maudlin piece of unresolved nostalgic longing, coupled with a middle-aged artist's irritation with social practice at large.

Mobile Homestead already lives in the long shadow of being Kelley's 'last artwork' (Rimanelli, 2012: 271). And even critics aware of Kelley's essay are, in the face of the profound sadness associated with his untimely death, inclined to collapse the complexity of the interpretation of *Mobile Homestead* into sentimentality, as Amy Taubin illustrates in her *ArtForum* review of the project, shown at the Whitney Biennial:

Kelley intended the *Mobile Homestead* to be not merely a traveling public artwork but a means of bringing social services to communities in need. As he wrote in his heartbreakingly pessimistic essay for the Biennial catalogue, however, he never expected that there would be sufficient funding to support the social aspects of the project or even the operating cost of the vehicle. (Taubin, 2012)

Ultimately, though critics will be inclined to read this project in any number of ways as Kelley is eulogized and his oeuvre is situated in art historical terms, *Mobile Homestead*, as that piece which can never be fully resolved, never fully reconciled – if for no other reason than that it was not completed in the artist's lifetime – offers an extended meditation on puzzlement. To return to Bishop, participatory art is a 'form of *experimental activity* overlapping with the world' (Bishop, 2012: 284, emphasis ours). To this extent, Kelley's project – which will now be 'finished', presumably, by an anonymous set of others, thereby working within a new dimension of 'participatory art' – offers a different kind of problematized artistic encounter with the city of Detroit, while also serving as an emblematic example of Kelley's praxis of art making.

In the second half of this essay, we turn to an examination of Kelley's rhetorical sophistication in handling and manipulating the narratives associated with his art making over the course of his career. Far from simply dystopic or contrarian, Kelley's *Mobile Homestead* essay, though unique in terms of its subject matter, exhibits patterns that can be identified in interviews that have taken place over the past two decades. In what follows, we suggest that Kelley's comments about his own artwork seem to be implicitly aligned with ideas from critical theory regarding the relationship between knowledge, power and the idea of 'art's refusal'. Drawing upon excerpts of interviews as well as obituary reflections, we place Kelley's statements into conversation with concepts from Foucault, Deleuze, and philosopher John Baldacchino as a means to illuminate the complex mechanisms by which Kelley helped to formulate the narratives about his work, with a particular kind of self-awareness about how those narratives become established within institutional value systems.

Performance as Philosophy

Before we proceed to set up this conversation between Kelley, Foucault, Deleuze and Baldacchino, we would like to note, briefly, the kinds of problems that arise

from the uncomfortable marriage between art practice and critical theory. As Laura Cull explains, a history of 'application', in which critical theory has been applied to the analysis of art or, alternately, art has been used as an illustrative tool for critical theory, has led to an asymmetrical power relation between the two kinds of practices (Cull, 2012). Cull suggests that rethinking art practice as a 'kind of philosophy', would lead to a revised conception of 'what counts as philosophy' and might produce more sustainable, efficacious and ethical outcomes that benefit both arts practice as well as philosophical practice (Cull, 2012: 21). Framing Kelley's work and his statements about his work in terms of 'performance as research' or 'practice as research' might invite a dialogue between Kelley, Foucault, Deleuze and Baldacchino that seeks to 'bring things to consciousness' (Fleishman, 2012: 35) at the interstices of various kinds of philosophical projects.

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

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

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

Foucault explains his understanding of resistance and its relationship to change and freedom in the following way:

We are not trapped. We cannot jump *outside* the situation, and there is no point where you are free from all power relations. But you can always change it. So what I've said does not mean that we are always trapped, but that we are always free – well, anyway, that there is always the

possibility of changing ... [R]esistance comes first, and resistance remains superior to the forces of the process; power relations are obliged to change with the resistance. So I think that *resistance* is the main word, *the key word*, in this dynamic. (Foucault, 1997: 167)

Potentially, then, Kelley's choices within his early performance work might constitute what Foucault describes as 'changing the situation.' Kelley remains located within the relations of power, but his observations of how meaning is co-produced within those power relations leads him to 'resistant' acts in which meaning is contradicted, doubled-over on itself, reversed or inverted.

Absorbing and Manipulating Perception

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

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

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

In Deleuze's study of Foucault, he describes the way that self-relations emerge out of a series of 'foldings' in which 'external' power relations are 'folded back to create a doubling, allow[ing] a relation to oneself to emerge, and constitut[ing] an inside which is hollowed out and develops its own unique dimension' (Deleuze, 1988: 100). Kelley's discussion of his development of *More Love Hours*, and the way that it came to produce a dialogical set of meanings as the public read and

interpreted the work over time, suggests this kind complex relationship to interiority and exteriority. Kelley explains his work and his relationship to his work as an actor who is constantly negotiating external power relations in the service of the production of meaning when he says: 'My work is very reactive. I make something. I get a response that I have no idea I was gonna get. I don't reject it, I embrace it. I run with it, you know? That tells me what to do' (Kelley, 2005). As Aurelia Armstrong explains, as social norms act on the body, they 'at the same time produce an "inside" as an "interiorization of the outside"' (Armstrong, 2008: 26, citing Deleuze, 1988:103). Kelley expects and even seems to seek out the normative responses to his work, actively incorporating them into the material and narrative composition of his body of work over time.

In subsequent works, such as *Educational Complex* (1995) and *Day is Done* (2005), Kelley continues to create spaces that could be defined as an 'interiorization of the outside.' With *Educational Complex*, he picked up on the popularization of 'Repressed Memory Syndrome', which had gained quite a bit of media attention through scandalous televised court cases in which adult children accused parents of abuse, years after it had allegedly occurred, because therapists had helped them to 'uncover' memories that had been repressed. Kelley responded to this public phenomenon by creating 'an architectural model constructed from foam core that amalgamates the floor plans of every school that [he] ever attended' complete with reconstructed 'floor plans from memory, facetiously claiming that the spaces he could not remember were sites where he had been abused' (Miller, 2012). Anticipating that the public – which was, as Kelley described, 'infatuated' (Kelley, 2006) with issues of Repressed Memory Syndrome and child abuse – would naturally read this content into his sculpture, Kelley intentionally invited, even coaxed this interpretation, coyly impersonating a hypothetical viewer when he says, 'Like why can't Mike Kelley remember all these rooms in the schools he went to every day for, you know, most . . . half of his life,' only to resolve the rhetorical question by remarking, 'Well, nobody can' (Kelley, 2006). He is aware that the reason he can't remember the specific details of all of the buildings from his childhood is because 'nobody can' – everyone is destined to forget these details over time. But the delicious joke is to toy with the contemporary public interest in this debunked syndrome and draw it into the work. As John Miller explains:

While the non-existence of evidence doubtlessly intrigued Mike in this work, he used it to put forward a kind of allegorical institutional critique: the abuse exacted by the institution concerns exclusion and legitimation, nothing less than a matter of symbolic life and death. (Miller, 2012)

Not only did Kelley take a reflexive stance with regard to the production of meaning related to his artwork, he came to embody the idea of 'the subject as a mode of reflexivity'. As Aurelia Armstrong explains:

the process of subjection to disciplinary norms, or constitution by social

power, produces the subject as a mode of reflexivity and, thus, creates a gap between the self and the social forces that constitute it. It is this distance from the conditions of its formation which opens up a minimal space of freedom and allows us to describe the Foucauldian subject as simultaneously constituted and constituting, both embedded and detached. (Armstrong, 2008: 27)

In relation to his 2005 piece *Day Is Done*, Kelley describes a relationship to popular culture that might be characterized as being both 'embedded and detached,' in the Foucauldian sense:

Popular culture is really invisible. People are really oblivious to it. But that's the culture I live in and that's the culture people speak. My interest in popular forms is not to glorify them, because I really dislike popular culture in most cases. (Kelley, 2010)

And yet – Kelley actively uses popular culture as his source material, as he does in *Day Is Done*, an elaborate film series in which Kelley directed performers to re-enact hundreds of rituals associated with high school – from pep rallies to quasi-religious celebrations. But the rituals are delivered through Kelley's characteristically warped perspective – the pep rally crowd does a familiar cheer, but some of the students are dressed in odd masks; a young girl riding a donkey is serenaded by a 'kind of' barber-shop group of male singers, but their tune is strange and dark.

Kelley further complicates his relation to popular culture, and its role in his understanding of his own experience and even of reality, when he explains that all of his work:

is associative and comes from my own experience, but its very hard to, say, to disentangle memories of films, or books or cartoons or plays from 'real' experience, it all gets mixed up, so, in a way, I don't make such distinctions. And I see it all as a kind of fiction. (Kelley, 2005)

Kelley regularly expresses fascination – even delight – with social ritual as well as the ritualizing of social practice through art, and the unique role that art can play in exposing the dysfunction inherent in these rites and rituals, given that 'art is some sort of interesting area where dysfunction is allowed' (Kelley in Miller, 1992). Kelley, then, through radical and perverse forms of inclusion (including elements of popular culture and both the associations he makes and doesn't make with it), offers a form of refusal. In this sense, he works not to replicate what he observes or interprets, but rather to offer a form of rejection which is built into a familiar container. And as he is characteristically interested in multiple modes of reception – as he says, from the laziest viewer to the most sophisticated – he creates in such a way that audiences may read the work only for its surface meaning, or they may seek to find new, unexpected or even

'incorrect' readings of the work – which can then be reabsorbed by Kelley as the work continues to produce meaning over time.

This is a process that Foucault explains in terms of refusal, when he writes that 'the task nowadays is not to discover what we are, but to refuse what we are ... We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries' (Foucault, 1982: 216). Art education philosopher John Baldacchino argues that contemporary art's 'groundlessness' is a form of refusal:

Art's great denial, its *gran rifiuto*, is neither metaphysical nor political. Rather, it is an exchange between those who take to art's stage where it is presented and discussed, made and 'learnt'. In contemporary art, everyone – from artist, to art form, to performer, to the audience – exchanges roles in response to art's historical alterity. (Baldacchino, 2005: 2)

Negative Aesthetic Subjectivity

Kelley's implicit understanding of the complexities of his own subjectivity and the way that this is made manifest in his art, is summarized in his description of his own 'negative aesthetic':

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

John Miller supports the interpretation of Kelley as harboring a sophisticated understanding of the way that his work interacts with popular culture and institutional power when he writes that 'the casualness of Mike's observations belies his trenchant critique. ... there is no outside to the apparatus... Nonetheless, this apparatus is what bonds us' (Miller, 2012).

Kelley's interviews and writings about his work reveal that he is invested in – fascinated with – processes of manipulation when it comes to the production of meaning in art. Furthermore, over the course of his career, Kelley demonstrates an increasing self-awareness of his own complex subjectivity, which is, in part, informed by his own position as an instrument of the art market and its corresponding narratives and value systems, even as he remains committed to the weird, undefined possibilities within the making of and interpretation of art. Kelley actively draws upon various artifacts of cultural production, intentionally manipulating viewers' expectations, which demonstrates his understanding of the relationship between knowledge, power, and art's role in simultaneously

producing and 'refusing' established systems of knowledge and power. He incorporates and absorbs inherent conflicts within his work and, in interviews, he takes opportunities to make transparent the conflicts that exist within his body of work, as well as the conflicts that exist within the narratives he has produced about his work.

Conclusion

One of the more ironic – or perhaps paradoxical – elements of Mike Kelley's life, now examined in retrospect, is the extent to which he, himself, had become an institution over the course of his career. As John Miller writes:

The inevitable success of Mike's work transformed him from underdog to celebrity. He hated that. It fed into what became his crippling agoraphobia. As hard as Mike worked to produce a more potent form of art, his resulting celebrity status confronted him with an irresolvable contradiction: that esthetics always necessarily manifests social hierarchy. (Miller, 2012)

Miller's reflection on Kelley corresponds with Foucault's expression, near the end of his life, of discomfort with being touted as a 'great figure of intellectual life':

There is a social phenomenon that troubles me a great deal: Since the 1960s some teachers are becoming public men with the same obligations. I don't want to become a prophet and say, 'Please sit down, what I have to say is very important'. I have come to discuss our common work. (Foucault, 1988 [1982])

Revisiting Kelley's *Mobile Homestead* essay, we return to his statement that 'going public led to a nightmare of complexity, not only in the production of the work but also, personally, in its very meaning for me' (Kelley, 2012: 161). This stands in stark contrast to Kelley's discussion of his earlier works – the early performance works, and *More Love Hours* – in which we hear Kelley delighting in the missed signals and missed interpretations that characterize the public reception of his work. Indeed, these are formative experiences which contribute to the forging of his 'negative aesthetic', which actively toys with a kind of receptive antagonism – anticipating what the public might think and then manipulating expectations accordingly. This is a part of his game – this is a part of his refusal – and this, in some respects, remains consistent as he pursues his *Mobile Homestead* project. But – a nightmare of complexity? From the man who seems to thrive in complexity? An expression that not only the production of the work, but also the 'personal meaning' of the work *for him* was compromised in the process of going public? This sounds to be the obverse of the patterns which characterized his earlier works, in which personal meaning was, seemingly, not even at stake, and the public response was something upon which he had come to depend, as he explains: 'My work is very reactive. I make something. I get a response that I have no idea I was gonna get. I don't reject it, I embrace it. I run

with it, you know? That tells me what to do' (Kelley, 2005). We have to ask whether the *actual* personal nature of the *Mobile Homestead* project was productive of a response, a set of relations for Kelley, which defied his extraordinarily performative stance. As Tulsa Kinney writes in her 2012 interview with Kelley, the last known interview that Kelley gave to anyone:

Kelley continues to talk about [*Mobile Homestead*] as a public piece that was never meant to be public. Kelley left Detroit, but did he really leave it behind? He says the stuffed animals had nothing to do with childhood. (Really?) He says he needs to stop making art for a while, but now he's working on a huge project [*Mobile Homestead*] that could be one of his most important pieces to date. (Kinney, 2012)

Perhaps the subject matter at work in *Mobile Homestead* – raising questions about his actual home, his origin story, and the region which had become a stranger to him in his adult life – presented Kelley with a set of material phenomena which could not easily be ushered into his established mode of production, characterized by earlier works like *Educational Complex* and *Day Is Done*. It makes us wonder if the content of *Mobile Homestead*, coupled with the paralyzing discomfort Kelley was experiencing – in reaction to his own celebrity status, as described by John Miller – was compromising his ability to participate in his inherently interrogative, resistant 'negative aesthetic', as he puts it in his *Art 21* interview. Deleuze asks:

[W]hat happens... if the transversal relations of resistance continue to become restratified, and to encounter or even construct knots of power? ... If power is constitutive of truth, how can we conceive of a 'power of truth' which would no longer be the truth of power, a truth that would release transversal lines of resistance and not integral lines of power? How can we 'cross the line'? And, if we must attain a life that is the power of the outside, what tells us that this outside is not a terrifying void and that this life, which seems to put up a resistance, is not just the simple distribution within the void of 'slow, partial and progressive deaths'? (Deleuze, 1988: 94-5)

Did Mike Kelley find himself absorbed into a knot of power, unable to 'cross the line' to his satisfaction? Writes Noellie Roussel in her tribute to Kelley, 'Master provocateur, they say, and this I know you'd have enjoyed, but that wasn't the aim, it was the *result*' (Roussel, 2012a). Is there a point at which one can no longer provoke, or provide provocation in the manner one might want, due to the limitations of status? Kelley had become an institution – comfortable manipulating his role in that sense, but perhaps also increasingly uncomfortable with that status and what it meant.

Michael Smith's obituary for Kelley in *ArtForum* continues to probe into the artist's unusual, unstable relationship as a moderator or mediator of culture:

Mike was a control freak in life, and he continued to be one even after his death. He stipulated that there be no funeral, no public memorial, and that his ashes be spread over a national park. He didn't want much hoopla, but he did let it be known that friends and family should toast him with Vernors ginger ale while listening to the MC5's "Starship" ... It was a bittersweet good-bye from Mike, who was reminding us one last time that he hailed from Detroit - but this time doing it with a wink delivered through the man on the Vernors can, as we toasted Mike 's memory and reconciled our complicated feelings about someone we loved, respected, and will miss terribly for a long time. I can hear Mike screaming, "LIBERAL MAINSTREAM BULLSHIT!" (Smith 2012: 244-5)

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Biography

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