

PUPPET MASTERS: THE OBJECT AS PERFORMER IN ART

By

NATALIE HADDAD

A THESIS PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

2006

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Natalie Haddad

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The completion of this thesis would not have been possible without the support of many individuals. Firstly, I would like to thank my committee chair, Alexander Alberro, for going above and beyond the office of an academic advisor, for encouraging my ideas, and for always guiding me in the best direction. I would like also to thank Nora Alter, whose knowledge and insights proved indispensable, and Eric Segal, whose help at the worst of times allowed me to complete my work. In addition, I am indebted to Diedrich Diedrichsen for his generous counsel and personal accounts as I researched Martin Kippenberger. I am thankful as well to Marcia Isaacson for her instrumental role in my efforts to research overseas, and to Kristin Flierl, who was available to help whenever problems arose. Outside of UF, thanks are due to my former Editor-in-Chief, Jonathan Mahalak, for continually pushing me to improve my writing. And my final chapter would have lacked any virulence without its original inspiration, Alan Vega.

I am extremely grateful to my friends and family. Jaime Henderson, Robyn Reese, and Lauren Turner shared in my scholarship and encouraged me through a sometimes-arduous writing process. Meghan Cruz and Angela Perez provided the comfort and care of a family, as did Selim Pasho. Finally, I wish to express my immense gratitude to my parents, Jan and Cam, and, above all, my sister, Alexandra, for their abiding love and support.

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Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School
of the University of Florida in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

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By

Natalie Haddad

December 2006

Chair: Alexander Alberro
Major Department: Art History

Performance art is a genre in which the artist's actions, or actions directed by the artist, are the product. In much performance art, the artist is the art. Phenomenology posits that the body precedes the mind in its dialogue with the phenomenal world; thus the artist in performance is also an object in performance. This thesis addresses through a framework of phenomenology the potential of inanimate objects in art to communicate as performers. By occupying a role that diverges from or parodies its intended function, the art object can act upon or affect the viewing subject and create a dynamic that approximates the exchange between a viewer and a live performer. The thesis is organized into three models of performance. The first model examines the object as a performer of ideology through a series of installations and printed works by Martin Kippenberger (German, 1953-1997). The second model examines the object as a performer of banality, through a series of installations by Mike Kelley (American, b. 1954). The third model examines the object as a performer of nihilism, as represented by the machine performances of San Francisco-based art collective Survival Research Laboratories (formed 1978). In all three models, the object's action upon the subject calls into question the authority of the subject over the object, as enforced by Cartesian subjectivity, and, furthermore, foregrounds the fundamental objectness of the human subject.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Olympia's image hovered above his path in the air and stepped forth out of the bushes, and peeped up at him with large and lustrous eyes from the bright surface of the brook. Clara's image was completely faded from his mind; he had no thoughts except for Olympia.¹

In E.T.A. Hoffman's 1817 story *The Sand-Man*, the protagonist, Nathaniel, abandons his betrothed, Clara, to pursue a delusional and fitful love for his professor's "daughter," the automaton Olympia. Any theoretical analysis of *The Sand-Man* should take for granted the symbolic topography of the narrative. In "The Uncanny," Freud portrays Olympia as a peripheral vehicle for the story's central theme, the fear of castration. Neither human nor machine, Freud's Olympia is a dead gaze toward Nathaniel's Oedipus complex. Remove the symbolism, however, and the story is no less uncanny. The subject Nathaniel falls in love with an object. The dark fantasy of Hoffmann's romance thus bodies forth a text as rich and strange as the story's subtext. Nathaniel's attraction to Olympia exceeds her human appearance and her beauty—the most beautiful mannequins are still marked as other to humans, objects "singularly statuesque and soulless," which represent an ideal, but never embody it.² Olympia attracts not because she mirrors a human, but because she performs as one.

This thesis contends that objects have the capacity to communicate in relation to the conscious subject through means traditionally reserved for the subject. As they signify, the objects occupy roles through which they act upon or affect their others, including the subject. In other words, the objects perform. To some degree, the object has always been acknowledged within performance: obviously, in puppetry; less obviously, though significantly, in the stage

¹ E.T.A. Hoffman, "The Sand-Man," *Weird Tales*, trans. J.T. Bealby (New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1970), 199-200.

² Hoffman, 205.

props that facilitate an actor's performance. Yet in both cases, the object's performance is a product of the subject's agency. I propose to reconsider the object as a potential performer in itself, not merely as the subject's prop. The visual arts offers an effective entry into the subject matter because performance is prefigured in the exchange that takes place between the viewing subject and the object that is on display expressly to be viewed. The thesis is organized into three chapters; each addresses the performing object through a model of performance and through representative works by a specific artist or art collective.

Defining an object as in performance requires first ascribing to the object the agency to perform. Because agency is typically thought as something enabled by consciousness, and thus given over to the subject, the performing object is best understood in terms of the subject's performance. In "Performances: Belief in the Part One Is Playing," Erving Goffman attempts to carry the subject in performance beyond the proscenium. According to Goffman, a performance is "all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his[/her] continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers."³ Thus, any activity which takes place in front of observers, and to which the observers respond, is a performance (Goffman's examples include doctors treating patients with placebos and mechanics checking tire pressure for "anxious women motorists").⁴

J.L. Austin's seminal lecture series, "How To Do Things With Words," delivered in 1955 at Harvard, addresses a concept relative to Goffman's everyday performance, the performative utterance. The performative utterance is a statement that *does something*, or, per Austin, it allows

³ Erving Goffman, "Performances: Belief in the Part One Is Playing," *The Performance Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Bial (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 61.

⁴ Goffman, 60.

the speaker to do something (as in “I do” in a wedding ceremony).⁵ The power of words to “do things” is therefore predicated on the speaker’s agency—but the word, as opposed to the speaking subject, is the agent of the effect. As the doing shifts from the speaker to that which is spoken, the locus of the effect becomes the word itself. The semiotic sleight of hand that allows the words “I condemn you,” for example, a real consequence—that someone is condemned to something—prompts a redistribution of power which is founded in performance (in this case, the word’s performance), and which unsettles the subject’s hegemony over the object.⁶

The concept of performativity, which encompasses the performative utterance, is more abstract (Austin confined the latter within strict and subsequently contested parameters). In Henry Bial’s words, the performative “is similar—in form, in intent, in effect—to a theatrical performance”.⁷ Bial’s statement underscores the difficulty of defining performativity. But it points to at least an oblique relationship with performance. In reductive terms, the performative is the evidence of the performance. Jointly, the two above positions—Goffman’s and Austin’s—provide a foundation for the performing object. Performativity demonstrates a link between the word or object and the act of performance, and the everyday performance recognizes the role of the observer, along with the performer. The problematic of the object in performance (as opposed to the performative object) is thus negotiated by the positions, but neither one allows for its resolution because both secure the performance or the performative to the subject.

Paradoxically, though, the subject is simultaneously the fundamental performing object. Against the Cartesian discourse of the subject as disembodied consciousness, phenomenology

⁵ J.L. Austin, “How to Do Things With Words,” *The Performance Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Bial (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 17.

⁶ Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 16.

⁷ Henry Bial, “Performativity,” *The Performance Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Bial (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 145.

proposes an embodied subjectivity. It posits that the subject experiences the world as a sentient body prior to his/her cognitive engagement; in brief, the body precedes the mind. In his 1964 essay “The Intertwining–The Chiasm” (published posthumously), Maurice Merleau-Ponty addresses in particular the phenomenological subject-object exchange. The *chiasmus* refers to the intertwining between the subject and his/her surrounding world. According to Merleau-Ponty, the two parts–the subject and the object–are inseparable as what he calls the “flesh of the world.” He writes, “Where are we to put the limit between the body and the world, since the world is flesh? ... The world seen is not ‘in’ my body, and my body is not ‘in’ the visible world ultimately: as flesh applied to a flesh, the world neither surrounds it nor is surrounded by it.”⁸

Merleau-Ponty’s chiasmus finds a poignant expression in the work of body artists from the late 1960s and the 1970s. In contrast to previous performance artists, for whom the action typically presides over the actor, the body artist produces an object-based art in which the body is privileged; the performance is the apparatus through which the body manifests itself. Early feminist artists such as Hannah Wilke and Carolee Schneemann, for instance, responded to western culture’s masculinist objectification of the female body by hyperbolizing the its visibility.⁹ Coextensively, the masochistic performances of artists like Gina Pane, Vito Acconci, and (probably most notoriously) Chris Burden treated the body as an expressive surface, wrested apart from its ruling subjectivity.¹⁰ The feminist and the masochistic artists equally foreground the body-as-object in performance; yet in both cases, the work implicitly enforces the hegemony

⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “The Intertwining–The Chiasm,” *The Theory of Difference: Readings in Contemporary Thought*, ed. Douglas L. Donkel (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 122.

⁹ I am thinking of works such as Wilke’s *Hannah Wilke: Through the Large Glass* (1976-78) and Schneemann’s *Naked Action Lecture* (1968) and *Interior Scroll* (1975).

¹⁰ Each of the artists here used self-abuse as a form of expression: for example, Acconci repeatedly bites his body in *Trademarks* (1970) and Pane cuts her stomach in *Action Psyche* (1974). Regarding Chris Burden’s notoriety, one can see works such as *Shoot* (1971) and *Through the Night Softly* (1973).

of the subject. The body in the former is weighted with the politics of its particularity (gender, race, shape, appearance) and exteriorized as object in order to reassert a particularized subjectivity. Similarly, the act of self-abuse in the latter asserts the will of the subject over the object. In other words, the object performs, but the subject receives all the credit.

More recently, the performance art of Vanessa Beecroft has inaugurated a space for the body finally free of the subject's inexorable will. For performances such as *vb47* (2001), Beecroft instructs an assembly of nude or nearly nude models to pose, essentially, as objects: they move slowly and self-consciously, if at all; mute and on display, as bodies to be viewed. The models act as agents upon the viewer not in spite of, but because of their sheer objectness. The body is here theatricalized as an impassive surface that tempts subject's projections in order to shoot them back.

Thus Beecroft's desubjectified bodies give way to Hoffmann's automaton. Functionally, the models and the automaton are equivalent: the viewer/reader projects the difference. And it serves only his/her interests. For all intents and purposes, subjectivity for Beecroft's models and for Olympia is superfluous; more, it may be a hindrance. The success of both performances lies in their ability to unsettle the subject—indeed, to unsettle subjectivity. As they provoke the revenge of the Cartesian subject against the phenomenological one, they lay bare our collective insecurity as bodies threatened by our embodiment and, thus, our visibility. As Jacques Lacan writes, “The picture, certainly, is in my eye. But I, I am in the picture.”¹¹ In particular, Olympia's performance—and her concomitant power to act upon the viewer—poses a threat because it grants the object the subject's agency. Still, Olympia's performance is relatively easy to assimilate into

¹¹ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), 96.

a traditional performance framework because she appears to be human.¹² But if, as Merleau-Ponty proposed, the object is the flesh that is the subject, the performing object is not limited to the anthropomorphic one. The object mediates the subject's engagement with the world and, in Lacanian terms, it gazes back, as Lacan's sardine can be gazed back at him.¹³

No single definition exists to distinguish the object that performs from one that evidently does not; any object is potentially a performer. For clarity, however, a provisional definition is worthwhile. The performing object, like the performative utterance, is one that does something. It acts upon its environment—including the viewing subject; it enacts a role removed from its ostensible function. The chapters that follow address the performing object within art through three broad models of performance: 1) the ideological; 2) the banal; and 3) the nihilistic. Like any models, these are intended as guidelines; if the object performs, it also slips—like the subject—between positions and purposes.

Chapter one addresses the dialogue between the performing object and the ideological structures that organize western society through a series of works by German artist Martin Kippenberger. Kippenberger exteriorizes the strategies of western ideology by appropriating them into his own art practice. Ideologies situate our relationship with art, yet art allows a space in which those ideologies may be infiltrated and inverted. Kippenberger's works—in particular his early self-portraits and “tourist” photographs—perform identity and thus transform the artist himself into a “grand gesture,” a performing object. Similarly, his *Metro-Net World Connection*, a trompe l'oeil subway system, theatricalizes the performativity inherent in our negotiation of ideologies. Furthermore, the doubling devices of parody and irony expose the structures through

¹² This theme is apparent in science fiction movies featuring automata or androids, from the early science fiction of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) to such late dystopian films as Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982).

¹³ I am referring to Lacan's anecdote in which a sardine can caught in the sunlight seems to gaze at the author. *Fundamental Concepts*, 95.

which they signify. As a result, the works never fall prey to the ideologies that they seek to interrogate, as is the possible pitfall of political artwork.

Chapter two abandons Kippenberger's grand gestures and transitions to the quotidian side of ideology vis-à-vis American artist Mike Kelley. Kelley's work with craft materials and—infamously—soiled stuffed animals from the 1980s exploits both the pathos and the relentless banality of the objects. The pieces address foundational ideologies including religion and Cartesianism in order to debase them—to reduce them to the detritus of Middle America. In his *Dialogue* series Kelley's stuffed animals distantiate the disembodied subject by performing their own (inevitably failed) disembodiment. They personify waste as they beckon projection, and in turn they initiate a chiasmic exchange in which the flesh of the world is pockmarked. His work with *Repressed Memory Syndrome*, specifically the architectural model "Educational Complex," extends the banal into the invisible spaces of repressed memory as the model enacts a metanarrative of repressed trauma. The chapter examines the ways in which a prosaic object (here, the architectural model) can, like the toys, hyperbolize its banality, by performing against it.

Finally, chapter three considers the object's capacity to perform the implosion of meaning. The performing machines of Mark Pauline and his San Francisco-based collective Survival Research Laboratories (SRL) serve as a nihilistic attack on the other two models. The machines signal a radical return to the kinetic object in art. Yet where previous kinetic pieces posited the artwork primarily as a novelty or as an avatar of technological progression—thus a utopian object—SRL repositions the object within a dystopian framework.¹⁴ The performances, which pit

¹⁴ Works such as Jean Tinguely's *Study for the End of the world No. 1* (1961) and *The Dissecting Machine* (1965) serve as obvious precedents for SRL's destructive machines. However, in early kinetic works, such as Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's *Light Space Modulator* (1930) and Alexander Calder's mobiles (first shown in 1932), an emphasis on the constructive properties of technology is far more apparent than Tinguely's later emphasis on destruction.

machines against one another in battles without winners, articulate a sphere emptied of meaning and consequence. They integrate violence, technology (primarily military), political iconography and death—represented by animal skeletons and carcasses—into an absurd anti-spectacle, which ultimately produces nothing, and, moreover, which impedes the valuation of anything produced within its sphere.

Performance, as an act or as a concept, is elusive. It exists in transition—as much in the interstices between acts as on the stage. The performer accommodates the performance by transitioning with it. The object, without consciousness, is the performer’s apparent antithesis. However the act is not located within the actor: it is inscribed in the events *and in the objects* that constitute the world. And if the viewer is necessary to the performance, it is as witness, not as master.



Figure 1.1. Hannah Wilke, *S.O.S. Starification Object Series*, 1974, silver gelatin prints.

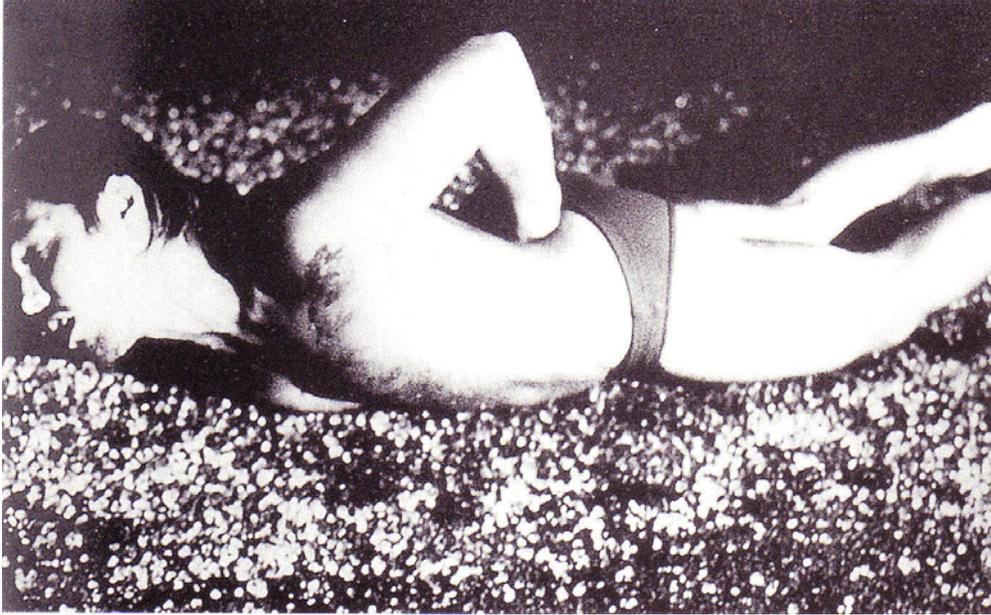


Figure 1.2. Chris Burden, *Through the Night Softly*, 1973, performance still.



Figure 1.3. Vanessa Beecroft, *vb47*, 2001, performance still.

CHAPTER 2 MARTIN KIPPENBERGER'S IDEOLOGICAL OBJECTS

In 1993, two years after his monumental installation *Tiefes Kehlchen* (*Deep Throat*) in an auxiliary construction tunnel for an underground transit system in Vienna, Martin Kippenberger began work on his *Metro-Net World Connection*. Billed in his 1995 Metro-Net catalogue as a “world-wide subway,” the Metro-Net was a network of trompe-l’oeil subway entrances and ventilation shafts installed in improbable locations throughout the world. By 1998, it comprised three sited entrances (in Syros, Greece; Dawson City, Yukon, Canada; and Leipzig, Germany), a “transportable” entrance for *Documenta X* (Kassel, Germany), a crushed entrance for Metro Pictures (New York), and two ventilation shafts (MAK Center, Los Angeles; Münster, Germany—transportable). Against physical and technological limitations, the project conjured an illusory system of global containment. It also demonstrated the capacity of objects to perform.

Kippenberger’s project belongs to a vast genealogy of performative art objects: in 1961, for example, Piero Manzoni produced “Socle du Monde,” an iron and bronze pedestal with the titled inscribed upside-down. In “Socle du Monde” the pedestal and the (literal or implied) body of the viewer transform the piece from a purely semiotic exercise—a “pedestal of the world” carried out through language—into a performative act. Yet where Manzoni’s gesture is primarily an extension of the readymade—an interrogation of the artwork’s limitations—the *Metro-Net* negotiates the boundaries of ideology by performing an impossible system. In the *Metro-Net*, the object’s capacity to perform is bound neither to a conventional performance nor to an essential characteristic of the object (as in Mike Kelley’s stuffed toys); the project’s performance, particularly vis-a-vis the viewer, transcends its objects. The project performs in the theatrical sense of the term: it plays what it is not; objects, as actors, perform a global transit system as an allegory of the ideological system of globalism. In “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,”

Althusser writes, “What is represented in ideology is ... not the system of real relations which govern the existence of individuals, but the imaginary relation of those individuals to the real relations in which they live.”¹ Ideology is thus a system of performed relations that is perpetually denied access to the real relations it performs. The *Metro-Net* materializes Althusser’s formulation by enacting a “real” (material) relational system that stands in for, without ever accessing, an imaginary (ideological) system.

The subway, in particular, is an apt metaphor for globalism, which is both born from and doomed by a larger ideological system, utopianism. A subway is a modernist system, a technologized network in which lines of travel are (theoretically) neither isolated (as with air travel) nor hampered (as with ground travel). The subterranean structure is veiled, but open; it functions through unification. The *Metro-Net* sublates the mechanics of the system to a point of transcendence in the sense that it “operates” outside of physical limitations—i.e., oceans and continents. The utopian encoding of its fantastical technology is inscribed throughout the project. The modernist technocracy and the postmodern global village are interfaced to (per)form a utopian body that is simultaneously immaterial (liberated from the world) and encompassing (containing the world). The *Metro-Net* inevitably fails as utopian, however, because its material, and thus ideological, system does not exist. As Steven Prina writes, “Kippenberger substitutes an ongoing, fragmented program that promises, but never delivers, a totalizing structure.”² The *Metro-Net* desublimates the ideological system that it conjures by acting out, through its own material fragmentation, the impossibility of an unbroken global network. The immateriality of the system is inverted into absence; the “totalizing structure” is a pantomime horse. In his essay,

¹ Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation),” *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 2001).

² Steven Prina, “Regard the Pit,” *Martin Kippenberger: The Last Stop West*, ed. Peter Noever (Los Angeles, CA: MAK Center for Art and Architecture, 1998), 11.

“Crash,” Baudrillard writes, “[T]echnology is the mortal deconstruction of the body—no longer a functional medium, but the extension of death.”³ Baudrillard’s referent is a ritual body of a modernist dystopia (as in the novel/film *Crash*)—one still harnessed to a utopian-dystopian binary in which one term is always the precondition for the other.⁴ By contrast, the *Metro-Net* is a product (at least contextually) of the alienated body of postmodernism; yet, it implicates the binary in the sense that the system’s strategic failure inverts its utopian encoding. However, by performing the transit system and its concomitant ideological system, it instead undermines the binary: the absurdity of the project lays bare the utopian and the dystopian as naturalized constructs posed as essential (if impossible) states—as performances. It denaturalizes by flaunting the fissures of a global system through a double interrogation, of globalism’s mythic whole and of its own futility as a critique of an impossible system. In Brechtian terms, it performs the performance (as opposed to the role) in order to expose both performances as “fakes.”⁵

The relationship between the individual objects—their illusory network—is integral to the efficacy of the performance: the objects can only form a system by transcending their materiality. However, the *Metro-Net*’s identity is contingent on the particularity of the pieces. Each one performs its own role, in dialogue with its context, and is strategically removed from its referent in reality.⁶ Of the three installed entrances, only Leipzig is closed from the exterior (Syros and Dawson City allow the viewer to descend a flight of stairs before encountering locked gates/doors). The entrance, almost twice as deep as those in Syros and Dawson City and painted

³ Jean Baudrillard, “Crash,” *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1994), 111.

⁴ Because a dystopian body, or system, is the inverse of the utopian, it is still anchored to a whole. The fragmentation of the body in *Crash* is literal, or represented through the literal bodies of automobiles. The fragmented body is alienated from its metaphysical wholeness only because of its dystopian state; but the wholeness is acknowledged.

⁵ I am referring here to Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt*, or “estrangement effect,” which Bial describes as “a theatrical technique that makes the familiar appear strange and/or the strange appear familiar.” Bial, “Performing,” *The Performance Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Bial (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004), 183.

⁶ By “referent in reality,” I simply mean an actual, functioning subway system.

an industrial gray, is locked with steel gates bearing the insignia of Kippenberger's pseudo men's club, the Lord Jim Lodge.⁷ Paradoxically, the absence of a body (literal or implied) within the structure promotes the illusion because the viewer approaches an evidently nonfunctioning system rather than an inexplicable underground termination (the interior point at which the performance ends).⁸ The artifice of the entrance is inscribed in its context (Leipzig Trade Fair) and in the absurdity of the system, therefore the illusion is stripped as it is built. By blocking off the termination, though, the reality of an absence is collapsed into the same metaphysical sphere as the illusion of a presence. While the Leipzig entrance proposes an equivalence between nonexistence and nonfunction, it additionally points to the slippage between function and nonfunction. It reverses the order of the readymade which, in reductive terms, is a functional object performing as a nonfunctional object.⁹ The entrance is, rather, a nonfunctional art object performing as a nonfunctioning utilitarian object. But because the reversal is performed, it serves to destabilize the function-nonfunction binary on which the readymade is predicated. It redefines the terms of "nonfunction" by assigning to both the "functional" and "nonfunctional" object the same function, of performance, thereby exposing the binary as a social construct.

By contrast, the Syros and Dawson City entrances flaunt their fictions. In both sites, the viewer descends the stairs into a corridor, in which he/she is immersed in the structure, and its attendant illusion. Where the Leipzig entrance facilitates the portrayal of an actual subway system by distancing the viewer, the Syros and Dawson City entrances absorb the viewer,

⁷ It is worth pointing out that, according to *Martin Kippenberger: The Last Stop West*, the bars are wide enough to squeeze through. By locking the gate, however, Kippenberger presumably intended the entrance to be closed off. *Martin Kippenberger: The Last Stop West*, 54.

⁸ The illusion of a nonfunctioning subway is furthered in the introduction to the catalogue to the exhibition *Nach Kippenberger*, in which the exhibition's curator begins an anecdote with an out-of-order subway. See, Eva Meyer-Hermann, "Nach Kippenberger," *Nach Kippenberger*, ed. Eva Meyer-Hermann and Susanne Neuberger (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2003).

⁹ One can think of perhaps the most famous readymade, Duchamp's "Fountain" (1917), which was essentially a urinal performing as an artwork.

specifically into the *Metro-Net* system, in what Amelia Jones in another context (following Merleau-Ponty) calls the “chiasmic intertwining of the self and other.”¹⁰ The exchange has two principal effects: 1) it foregrounds the performativity of the viewer, and 2) it replaces the dubious utopianism of the global network with an alternative structure that elides the network’s technological and ideological problematics.

The viewer’s performativity is foregrounded by the “chiasmic intertwining” in the sense that he/she acts according to, and along with, the performed codes of the viewed (i.e., the structure, the site, and the like). For instance, the discrepancy between playing and “being” a subway-rider is located not in the absence of a subway, but in the viewer’s awareness of the absence. Both are performed behaviors (no person “is” a subway-rider). In the latter, however, the performance is naturalized by social conditioning: a “real” subway is entered and ridden; the transaction between performance (subway rider) and effect (riding on subway) is literalized. The *Metro-Net* as a performance of a subway perpetually defers the literalization of the viewer’s act and thus distantiates the viewer from his/her performance. The viewer simultaneously performs as art viewer to the art object *Metro-Net*. The two roles—“subway rider” and “art viewer”—are imbricated with one another. They define and are defined by the object’s performances as artwork, subway system, and ideological system. The efficacy of the entrances is thus contingent on the viewer’s complicity and engagement with the object’s performance. More significantly, their efficacy is contingent on the disparity between the *Metro-Net* system and an actual subway system, underscored in the Syros and Dawson City entrances. The project becomes an ideal system only because it detaches from an actual system; it exists as a system outside of the historical and the material. By acting within, and according to, its parameters, the viewer actualizes the *Metro-Net* as its own system, and is actualized as a participant within its sphere.

¹⁰ Amelia Jones, *Performing the Subject*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 41.

Individually, the transportable entrance and ventilation shaft, as well as the crushed entrance, instantiate and interrogate a commodity system of infinite substitution and exchange by negating the nonfunctional object.¹¹ The transportable object instantiates the commodity exchange system that undergirds late capitalism and hyperbolizes its own commodity status by posing as a functional object diverted from its function (as opposed to the active nonfunction of the Syros and Dawson City entrances). Without use, the object's use-value (which, here, is a pretense—its use-value is anti-utilitarian) petrifies and the object itself changes from an expanding to a perpetually suspended body, an object in excess of its objecthood. The hyper object is purely a commodity—that is, its use-value is its exchange value, and its significations (however multiple) inevitably point back to its commodity status.¹² By the mid-1990s, the theme of the hyper-commodity was prevalent in art.¹³ Its significance in terms of the *Metro-Net* lies in the object's circulation of cultural ideology. According to Prina, the transportable entrance or ventilation shaft “had the potential to become a mass-produced element of the *Metro-Net World Connection* that could be deployed wherever the network might extend.”¹⁴ The transportable pieces therefore perform both on the level of the “pure” commodity, as objects that are reproduced to perpetuate the system of reproduction, and on the level of the utopian, as objects reproduced to perpetuate the system of globalism. Yet, because Kippenberger customized the objects—and because he customized them for a fictive system—their infinite reproduction would reproduce the commodity system only within Kippenberger's own parameters, and according to his own rules.¹⁵ Lucy

¹¹ It should be noted that the crushed entrance was not initially intended to be crushed. It was crushed to fit through the doors of the Metro Pictures gallery in Manhattan. By the time of its exhibition, the gallery had moved and the new location allowed room for the entrance in its original state; however, it had already been crushed.

¹² The object is made for exchange. Any additional significations—status, etc.—are related to its exchange value.

¹³ The hyper-commodity was prevalent particularly in the New York art scene, for example, in the commodity-based works of Jeff Koons, Haim Steinbach, or the Neo-Geo artists.

¹⁴ *Martin Kippenberger: The Last Stop West*, 54.

¹⁵ Individually, the entrances were customized according to their location: for example, the Dawson City entrance was constructed from local timber and the Leipzig entrance was given an “industrial” look to reflect the industrial

McKenzie writes, “Kippenberger’s is a system of self-perpetuation and justification, which does not allow for half measures. He cancels out the possibility of his own failure; the Complaints Office is closed.”¹⁶ McKenzie (addressing Kippenberger’s oeuvre) points to the process in which the *Metro-Net* forecloses on failure by reinscribing the parameters of the ideological system—here, globalism—through his own “system of self-perpetuation and justification.” The process extends beyond Kippenberger’s own art practice. In particular, the crushed entrance annuls failure by theatricalizing the art object’s excess. It performs its paralysis in lieu of its prescribed (or, here, performed) function; thus it not only performs nonfunction, as in Syros and Dawson City, but it forms the art object from a matrix of anti-function. Through its sheer objectness—not functional, not enterable, not (feasibly) exchangeable—it exteriorizes the object’s entropy: it articulates the art object precisely as unstructured, randomly directed energy, a functional failure. In “Myth Today,” Barthes proposes that “the best weapon against myth is perhaps to mythify it in its turn, and to produce an *artificial myth*.”¹⁷ The crushed entrance applies the same principle to the art object as failure (failure to function, failure to be “art”). Kippenberger produces an object that performs its failure, *an artificial failure*, and thus ensures the art object—in all of its commodity excess—against the cultural terms of failure.

Kippenberger also applies Barthes’s principle to the production of his own identity. Barthes writes, “[M]yth is a peculiar system, in that it is constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it: it is a second-order semiological system. That which is a sign (namely the associative total of a concept and an image) in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in

city. In addition, the Lord Jim Lodge insignia, on all of the entrances, marked them as Kippenberger’s projects—and further separated them from any actual subway system.

¹⁶ Lucy McKenzie, “Now That This Has Been Done It Will Never Have to Be Done Again,” *Nach Kippenberger*, ed. Eva Meyer-Hermann and Susanne Neuberger (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2003), 191.

¹⁷ Roland Barthes, “Myth Today,” *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1983), 135.

the second.”¹⁸ By performing an identity founded in myth (i.e., myth of the artist, myth of the transcendent subject), Kippenberger re-mythifies, and thus produces, *himself* as artificial—a fake, but one which cancels out the naturalized distinction between the performed and the “real” self, and therefore cancels out the fake. The effect is most evident in his self-portraits. Kippenberger emerged at a moment (mid 1970s) when the self/subject-as-construct had and was undergoing a critical interrogation in art.¹⁹ Kippenberger’s self-portraits are distinctive in the sense that they refuse to interrogate the self-as-construct. Instead, per Barthes, they take it as their point of departure.

As opposed to performing the other or “being” himself, Kippenberger performs himself, as himself—what Diedrich Diedrichsen refers to as “Selbstdarsteller,” literally, a self-performer.²⁰ Jones defines the “transcendent” artist/subject as the unmarked (white European male) body which projects its immanence onto a particularized (non-white, non-male and/or non-heterosexual) other. Kippenberger’s self-performance, as a white/European/male subject, apparently reiterates the codes and reinforces the cultural hegemony of the transcendent subject. According to Jones, however, the subject’s (illusory) transcendence is paradoxically undone by his exposure as a body.²¹ The body, shown in action (Jones uses the example of Hans Namuth’s photographs of Jackson Pollock), is made immanent. Kippenberger’s deliberate and hyperbolic visibility embraces the terms of Jones’s argument, but under the conditions of the (intentionally) performed self. In the postcard series *Knechte des Tourismus (Vassals of Tourism, 1979)*,

¹⁸ Barthes, 114.

¹⁹ This was particularly evident in feminist art of the time, for example, Hannah Wilke’s performances in which she interrogated her objectness by emphasizing it.

²⁰ Diedrich Diedrichsen, “‘Selbstdarsteller’: Martin Kippenberger between 1977 and 1983,” *Nach Kippenberger*, ed. Eva Meyer-Hermann and Susanne Neuberger (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2003).

²¹ Jones, *Performing the Subject*.

Kippenberger (with Achim Schächtele) poses as the consummate tourist in tourist spots around the United States. The series parallels the performative self-portraits of artists such as Cindy Sherman and Claude Cahun, to the extent that the artist plays a role. Yet where Sherman and Cahun perform themselves as other than themselves (“I am not what I imagined myself to be”²²), and therefore articulate the (here, particularized) subject’s alienation from him/herself, Kippenberger conflates his surface with his “self;” in effect, he performs as a surface without a self. In all cases, the artist clearly performs. Yet by playing a role that is identifiable as not-Cindy-Sherman, Sherman safeguards a self as an other to the photograph’s subject. By contrast, Kippenberger performs in *Knechte des Tourismus* as Kippenberger. He poses in four separate images: with a Disney actor in a Goofy costume; in a cowboy costume; in a prison cell (with bars bent for easy “escape”); and with a fake missile against a horizon of skyscrapers.²³ As a result, the series dismisses the self-portrait as a means of conveying the artist-as-artist, via image or, significantly, absence. Neither does it posit the artist as a sovereign subject, for whom any identity is colonized under the name of the Subject.²⁴ What it begins to demonstrate is the fluidity of Kippenberger’s self-performance. He adopts the tropes of the Western tourist—tropes which are nonspecific and precede the individual tourist—but always in the *role* of Martin Kippenberger.²⁵ And in doing so—by posing as a vassal of tourism—he poses himself as a trope, “the tourist.” The act serves to relinquish in part his subjectivity, as a singular individual, and,

²² Hal Foster, “Obscene, Abject, Traumatic,” *October* Vol. 78 (Autumn, 1996), 110.

²³ The series also included two portraits of Schächtele, one in costume and one illustrated in the style of a street illustrator.

²⁴ I am thinking of an artist such as Madonna. Madonna’s changes, in style, music, etc., are owned by her singular identity. For example, worn by Madonna, a kimono or a cowboy hat becomes her; she does not change to accommodate their prior significations.

²⁵ He does not play the subject Kippenberger, as in the Madonna example. Kippenberger is, in effect, the guide in the travelogue, but the cowboy costume does not become him.

moreover, to relinquish his transcendence, not just by making him visible, but by exposing his subjectivity (already acknowledged as constructed) as replicating and replicable.

The tourist is a paradoxical figure: He/she is positioned as originary source in a tourist-toured exchange (parallel to a viewer-viewed exchange in art), the subject to the other's object. Simultaneously, he/she is nonspecific, a general normative to the other, but infinitely repeatable and interchangeable with other tourists. The tourist is thus always already a copy. Kippenberger complicates the paradox. His "exaggerated self-performance"²⁶ exposes the fiction of the figure, and of photography as an apparatus for truth. Virtually any staged photograph, however, could have the same effect. More significant is the parodic dimension of the self-performance (as tourist). The images mock the tourist's imagined hegemony over the "toured" by theatricalizing his/her absorption into and desubjectification via the ideological system of tourism. He reassigns to the tourist a specific subjectivity (his own), but a subjectivity that is performed in the service of a performed tourism, and that, furthermore, is serialized. The tourist is produced as a mass identity, but no longer as an anonymous "I;" Kippenberger fills in, and is filled in by, the identity. The process 1) disperses his subjectivity (and thus singularity) across the diffuse body of the tourist figure; and 2) inverts the dispersal by encoding the body as "Martin Kippenberger," thus instating him as the tourist identity—in effect, the *copy* from which all copies are made. In other words, by projecting himself as (not *onto*) the tourist, he coalesces all tourists as "Kippenberger." The vassal of tourism becomes the vassal of ideology, but in Kippenberger's version of the phenomenon, the ideology is filtered through him. Roberto Ohrt writes, "To re-review Kippenberger's first signals in the '70s ... is to discover that they are almost all notifications of, advertisements for, a position in the social and public sphere Kippenberger

²⁶ Amelia Jones, "The 'Eternal Return': Self-Portrait Photography as a Technology of Embodiment," *Signs* Vol. 27, No. 4 (Summer, 2002), 949.

is rehearsing his role, testing images. He presents himself as if for a moment he has grasped success.”²⁷

Kippenberger’s early self-portraits further the inversion in *Knechte des Tourismus*, particular those portraits advertising his 21st and 25th birthdays: a stamp series, *21 Years Among You, Kippenberger 1953-1974*, and a poster, *A Quarter Century of Kippenberger as One of You, Among You, With You*.²⁸ Again, Kippenberger desublimates himself as the object of representation, but in such a way that his immanence as a body is lost to the image (his surface). Jones writes, “[The masquerade is] the production of the self as the thing most expected—but marking this thing as fake In the masquerade the victim exaggerates the very modes of passivity and object-ness projected onto her[him] via the male gaze.”²⁹ Clearly, Jones is addressing the female subject (here, Cindy Sherman), subjugated in Western society by the (white European) male gaze. The female subject, as recipient of the gaze, is constructed in and by society to be viewed; her “self” is always performed, therefore the naturalized gap between “real” and performed subjectivity is negated. The male subject views; his (fictive) wholeness as a transcendent subject is undone by its doubling as performative.³⁰ Kippenberger, as the unmarked male, reverses the gaze by making it conspicuous. Furthermore, he orchestrates his objectness.³¹ But by “taking place in representation,” and replicating the representation, he not only objectifies himself; he objectifies the transcendent male subject as another replicable sign to be passively consumed in the system of commodity exchange.

²⁷ Roberto Ohrt, *Kippenberger* (Cologne: Taschen, 1997), 19.

²⁸ Kippenberger made several posters promoting occasions, including his birthdays. The works discussed here are just two examples.

²⁹ Amelia Jones, “Tracing the Subject with Cindy Sherman,” *Cindy Sherman: Retrospective* (Chicago, IL: Museum of Contemporary Art; Los Angeles, CA: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1997), 35.

³⁰ From this perspective, the woman does not double; she is constructed entirely through performance.

³¹ Kippenberger poses himself as the object “Kippenberger,” therefore he retains the agency that objectness evidently relinquishes through the same exaggeration that Jones, in her quote, ascribes to Sherman.

In *Knechte des Tourismus*, Kippenberger performs as himself playing others (or, per tourism, playing an other). In this sense, he performs through the doubling mechanism of parody. The viewer can thus still claim a distinction (however artificial) between Kippenberger as the subject of the photographs and a “real” Kippenberger (ostensibly the Kippenberger orchestrating the pictured parody). The birthday announcements—*Quarter Century*, in particular—break down the distinction on the side of the image/performance, aided by reproduction and text.³² The doubling effect of Kippenberger’s performance, of himself as himself, is multiplied in the two series’ by the reproductive capacity of his media, photography and lithography. The subject Kippenberger, distilled into his own performative surface, is replicated as image in a process that loosely parallels Andy Warhol’s self-portraits. In both cases, the artist performs himself as image, but denies an other to the performed self. The artwork has no essential, shrouded meaning; its meaning is all inscribed on the surface. Yet where Warhol attempted to empty the sign of meaning, thus producing pure image, Kippenberger attempts the opposite. In other words, if Warhol’s image is intended to mean nothing, Kippenberger’s means everything.³³ He exaggerates his objectness (or, more precisely, his surface-ness), per Jones, but presents it as an overdetermined subjectivity—again, what Barthes identifies as “mythifying” the myth.

In *Quarter Century*, he poses in a restaurant with an old man. Kippenberger sits; the old man, standing, presses up to him with one arm around Kippenberger’s shoulder. The other arm holds the artist’s hand. A table, with cigarettes, flowers, and a gingham tablecloth, is in the background against a wall. The text, “1/4 Jhdt. Kippenberger als einer von Euch, unter Euch, mit

³² This is opposed, for example, to family photographs, for which the indexical image is presumed to represent the “reality” of the subject.

³³ Clearly, an image can mean neither nothing nor everything. However, Warhol’s attempts to evade both a fixed and a human identity—as in his famous claim that “I think everybody should be a machine” in a 1963 interview with Gene Swenson—seem to suggest “nothing” as his goal.

Euch,” is printed on the bottom corner and descriptives are printed in beams around Kippenberger’s head. *Twenty One Years* is a set of forty-eight stamps printed in pink and white, all but one with a portrait photo of Kippenberger at a different age (the one without the portrait is blank).³⁴ In both pieces, Kippenberger forms his narrative through a play of (in Barthes’s terminology) mythical signifiers, but also through what Craig Owens identifies as the rhetoric of the pose, or the “Medusa Effect.” Owens writes, “[T]o strike a pose is to present oneself to the gaze of the other as if one were already frozen, immobilized—that is, already a picture.”³⁵ Therefore, Kippenberger’s performance replicates his subjectivity, rather than splitting it, because he performs himself through the pose—in Owens’s words, as “already a picture.” The pose, then, preordains the replication. In “Clone Story,” Baudrillard writes, “[W]hen the double materializes, when it becomes visible, it signifies immanent death.”³⁶ In terms of cloning, the double inaugurates the death of the subject by fulfilling his/her desire to be replicated. Kippenberger’s replication has none of the literal immanence of Baudrillard’s clone, but the threat of death remains intact: his staged image—reproduced with (theoretically) neither a beginning nor an end—abandons the myth of the unique subject for a culturally produced and mediated mass subject. The narrative performed in the images is exteriorized as image; its replication/repetition evacuates its apparent singularity (which is itself a dead residue of modernism), thereby reproducing Kippenberger as a trope: “Kippenberger.”³⁷ As Benjamin

³⁴ It is worth noting that Kippenberger’s painting series, *Uno di voi, un Tedesco in Firenze* (1977) foreshadowed many of the devices used in both *Knechte des Tourismus* and the birthday ads, such as the phrase “one of you” and the use of “touristy” tropes as art images.

³⁵ Craig Owens, *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 198.

³⁶ Jean Baudrillard, “Clone Story,” *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1994) 95.

³⁷ This is similar to the effect of *Knechte des Tourismus*, in which Kippenberger is produced as the trope of the tourist, but the tourist becomes him. In this case, however, no other identity (tourist) intervenes; the trope is “Kippenberger.”

writes, “[T]he work reproduced becomes the reproduction of a work designed for reproducibility.”³⁸ The system of subjectivity is reproduced by perpetually deferring subjectivity itself.

The reproduction of the image has its counterpoint in the text. In “Twenty-One Years,” Kippenberger is “among you”; in *Quarter Century*, he is “one of you, among you, with you.” In both works, the text corroborates the rhetoric of the image, and harnesses the image to two theoretical identities, “Kippenberger” and “you.” According to Austin’s illocutionary model, the statement “performs its deed at the moment of the utterance”;³⁹ it fails as a performative if it does not accomplish what it states. Kippenberger’s statement performs, but its performance is abstract—“among you” is a metaphorical condition predicated on the presence of an ideological “you.” What it achieves, however, is the ideological dispersal of its subject (the trope “Kippenberger”) among—and thus intertwined with (one of, among, with)—you. In this sense, it functions according to Austin’s illocutionary model to the extent that it locates one theoretical subject among, or “as one of,” another. As opposed to Austin’s primarily legal examples—i.e., “I sentence you”—the statement’s openness is precisely what enables its performative success—it can be disproven no more than it can be proven.

In addition, the work interpellates the viewer as it engages with him/her. But because the “you” is unspecified, it may attach itself to all that is not Kippenberger: the old man in *Quarter Century*, Kippenberger’s peers, etc. Thus the “you” is addressed not just to the viewer, but to an

³⁸ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility,” *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol. 2, part 2, 1931-1934*, eds. Howard Eiland and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2005).

³⁹ This definition comes from Judith Butler. She also defines the illocutionary as “speech acts that, in saying do what they say, and do it in the moment of that saying.” Butler, 3.

anonymous, unfixed, and infinitely replicated/replicable body.⁴⁰ The relationship between Kippenberger and the audience (“you”) therefore forms an invisible ideological network—a populist analogue to the *Metro-Net*’s invisible global network: both are premised on a utopian, and inevitably impossible, system of collectivity and inclusiveness. But here the network assumes a distinctly political designation. The artist plays the politician, the one as the many. The egalitarianism of the text is betrayed by the repetition of Kippenberger’s image: the “one” is Kippenberger, but the many, paradoxically, is an absence to be filled in by the “one”’s presence. The result is that Kippenberger is not made one of the people; the people are made into “Kippenberger.”⁴¹ The images and the text are therefore deployed as ideological devices via the reproduction and dissemination of a grassroots rhetoric (“among you”), from one ideological body to another. Kippenberger is constructed in rhetoric, but the construction is his own, and the rhetoric is deliberately deployed—once again, it is marked as fake, as parody.

In this, as in all of the aforementioned works, both positions—Kippenberger’s and the viewer’s (or “you”)—are performances. What the pieces demonstrate above all is that social systems are made “real” because they are performed. In other words, by performing them—and integrating a network of viewers into the performance—Kippenberger simultaneously constructs them. And because the pieces perform through parody, they serve to expose what so many systems hide, that our objects exercise a power to perform our systems. By claiming authorship/authority, the subject appropriates and exploits the system’s tools. Yet the tools – the

⁴⁰ Owens identifies a similar phenomenon with Barbara Kruger’s use of “shifters” in language. He writes, “Kruger appears to address me, this body, at this particular point in space. But as soon as I identify myself as the addressee of the work, it seems to withdraw from me to speak impersonally, imperiously to the world at large.” Owens, 192.

⁴¹ It is worth acknowledging the significance of Kippenberger’s German heritage here. He had previously addressed German and, specifically, Nazi history in works such as the 1984 painting “Ich kann beim besten Willen kein Hakenkreuz erkennen (To the Best of My Ability, I Can See No Swastika)”. From this perspective, *Quarter Century* and related works can easily be read as parodies of Hitlerian propaganda. Thanks to Dr. Nora Alter for bringing this to my attention.

transit stations, the disseminated images, the propagandistic icons that enforce ideology through naturalization – are objects. Kippenberger's ideological revisions are limited, but they provide a glimpse of the object's veiled authority. That which does our bidding is not at our will.



Figure 2.1. Martin Kippenberger, *Metro-Net* entrance, Dawson City, Canada, 1995.

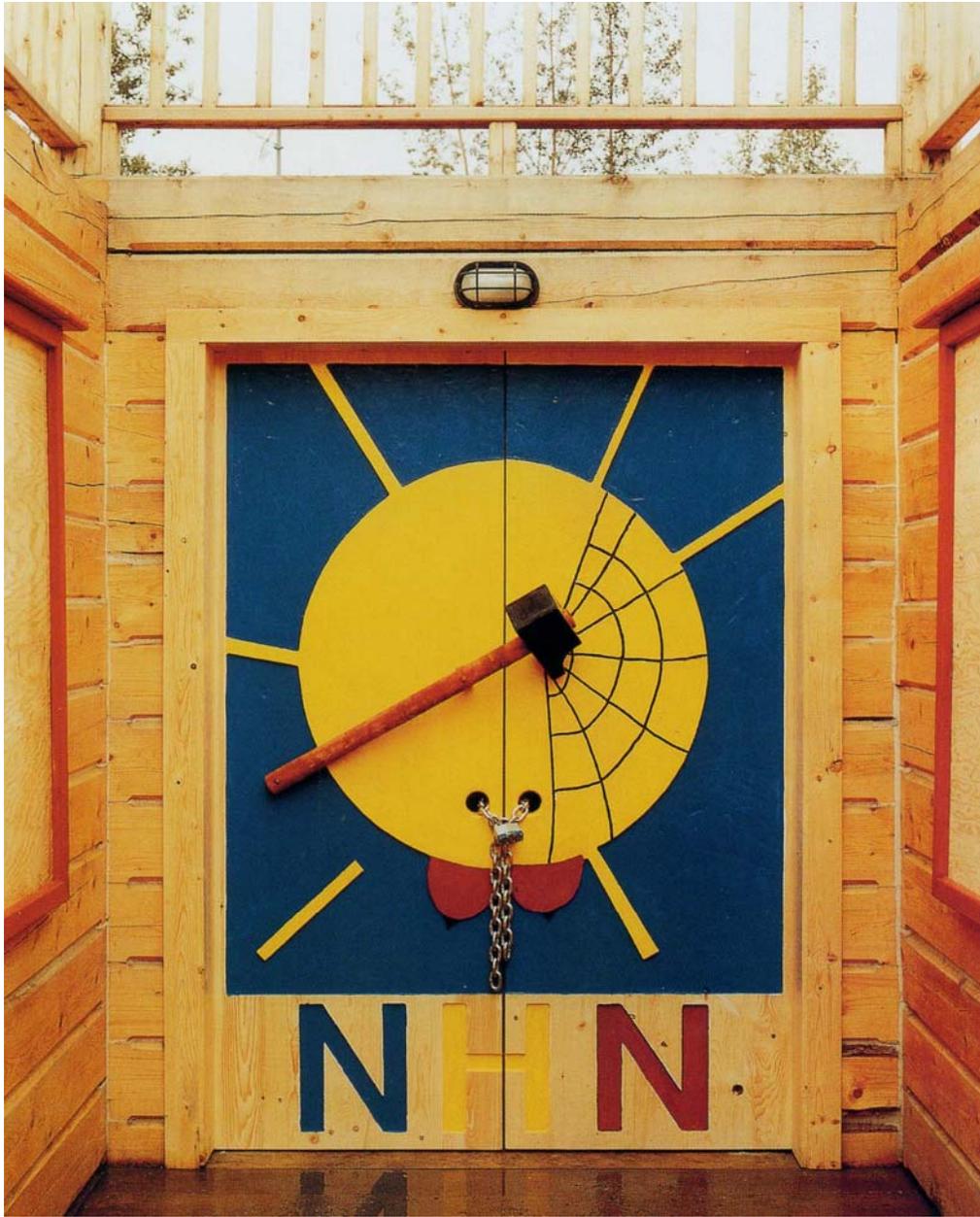


Figure 2.2. Martin Kippenberger, *Metro-Net* entrance, Dawson City, interior detail.



Figure 2.3. Martin Kippenberger, *Metro-Net* entrance, Syros, Greece, 1993.

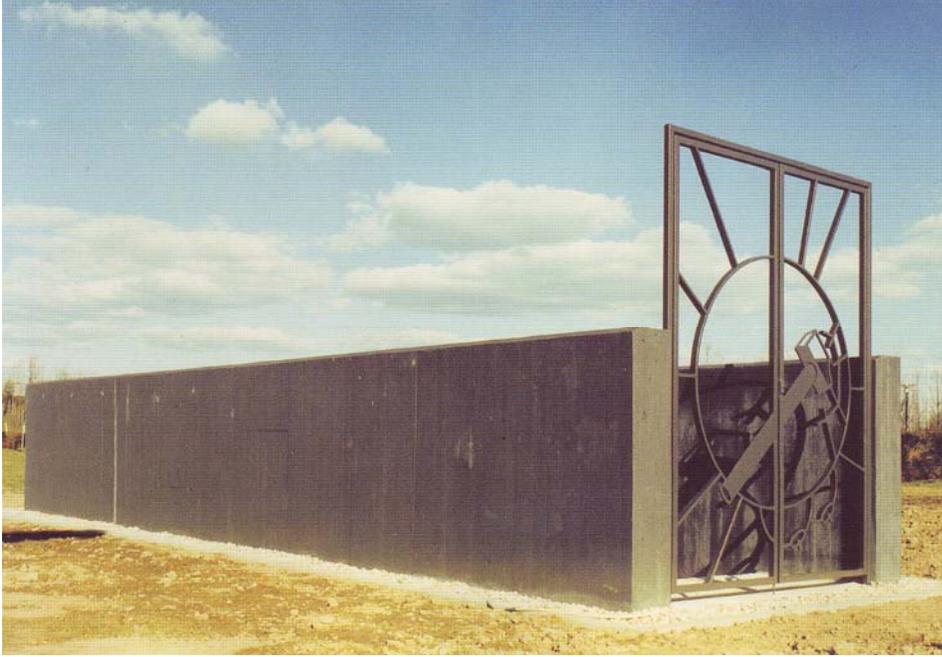


Figure 2.4. Martin Kippenberger, *Metro-Net* entrance, Leipzig, Germany, 1997.



Figure 2.5. Martin Kippenberger, *Metro-Net* entrance, Leipzig, front entrance.

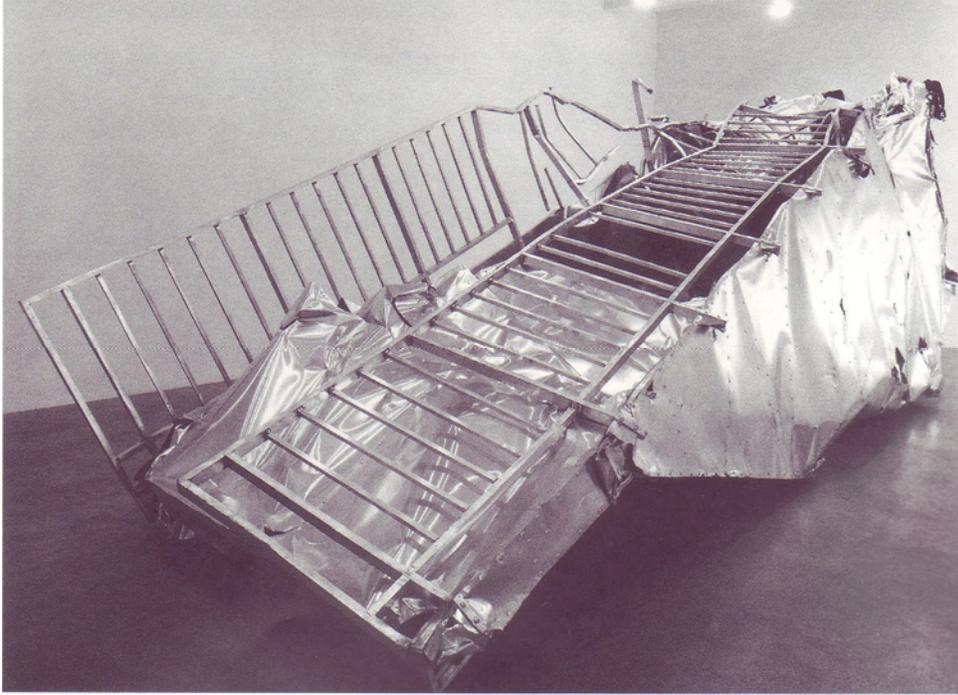


Figure 2.6. Martin Kippenberger, *Metro-Net (Crushed)*, Metro Pictures, New York, 1997.



Figure 2.7. Martin Kippenberger, *Metro-Net (Transportable)*, Documenta X, Kassel, Germany, 1997.



Figure 2.8. Martin Kippenberger, *Metro-Net* ventilation shaft (above ground), Munster, Germany, 1997.



Figure 2.9. Martin Kippenberger, *Metro-Net* ventilation shaft (underground), MAK Center for Art and Architecture, Los Angeles, 1998.

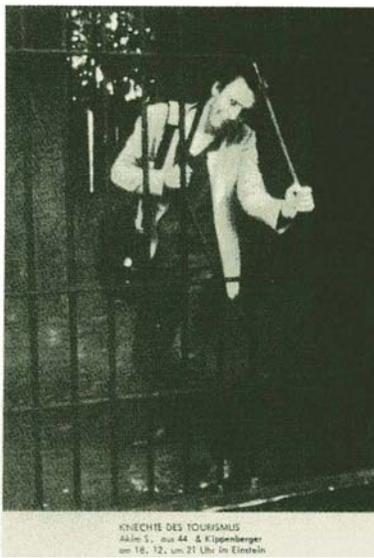
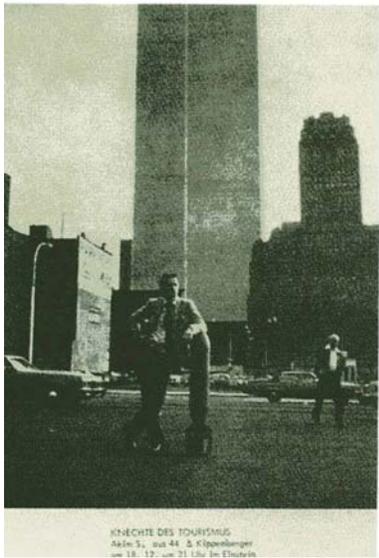


Figure 2.10. Martin Kippenberger, *Knechte des Tourismus (Vassals of Tourism)*, 1979.



Figure 2.11. Martin Kippenberger, *21 Jahre unter Euch, Kippenberger 1953-1974 (21 Years Among You, Kippenberger 1953-1974)*, 1974, detail.



Figure 2.12. Martin Kippenberger, *1/4 Jahrhundert Kippenberger – als einer von Euch, unter Euch, mit Euch* (*1/4 Century of Kippenberger – as One of You, Among You, With You*), 1978.

CHAPTER 3 MIKE KELLEY'S BANAL OBJECTS

The best way to fuck something up is to give it a body/ A voice is killed when it is given a body./ Whenever there's a body around, you see its faults/ Theory proves that/ The body of a famous critic came to our class the other day/ Now we don't believe its writings anymore/ Its writings became theatre/ And the presence of all that flesh made us think of all the things he didn't speak of ... of what was left out/ Authoritative voices must be disembodied to work/ A philosopher should never be seen!/ It's so sad—it makes you think of money, prostitution/ We would never make that mistake/ We would never give ourselves a physical manifestation/ That's why we are writing a book.¹

The discourse of disembodiment looms large in Mike Kelley's 1991 installation "Dialogue #1." Language, as both a semiotic and a philosophic system, vies for its transcendence from the physical, from the body to which it is attributed. It fights the form of the word with the infinity of the text, qualifies its spoken voice as an abstraction in space—a phantom presence, weighting the institution with its own denial. The actual dialogue in "Dialogue #1" is a recording; in a literal sense, then, the piece succeeds in distancing, if not severing, its discourse from a physical body. Kelley hides behind the curtain of a mechanized surrogate, a boombox speaks its Cartesian subjectivity. In practice, however, the piece exposes in the act of its utterance the fiction of disembodiment that it weaves. By speaking the discourse, the voice implicates a body in the text—it becomes performance. And, "Dialogue #1" (along with similar "Dialogue" pieces) has its performers, which crush any claim to transcendence with their own banality. Not just present, the performers are inexorably embodied.

"Dialogue #1" is part of a series of "Dialogue" pieces that followed *Half a Man* (1988), the exhibition from which Kelley gained fame and notoriety for his use of stuffed animals and craft materials. With the exception of "Dialogue #5 (One Hand Clapping)," which has one animal, the

¹ Excerpt from "Dialogue #1". Reprinted in Timothy Martin, "Janitor in a Drum: Excerpts from a Performance History," *Mike Kelley: Catholic Tastes*, ed. Elisabeth Sussman (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993), 85-86.

“Dialogue” pieces are composed of two secondhand stuffed toys facing one another on a blanket on the gallery floor, with a visible stereo playing their “conversation.” The recorded dialogue is performed both by Kelley (as author) and by the toys; however, the conversation clearly belongs to the toys. In both *Half a Man* and the “Dialogues,” Kelley confronts the viewer with explicitly performative objects—homemade stuffed toys and other populist crafts—that simultaneously elicit empathy and reek (sometimes literally) of past lives. And in both cases, the banality of the objects foregrounds the viewer-viewed exchange as a socially constructed behavior—a performance of Kantian disinterest that re-inscribes the object according to its context (here, the art institution) and delivers it to the viewer’s sovereign gaze. The primary difference between *Half a Man* and the “Dialogues” is that the toys in the “Dialogues” speak; they assume dual roles, that of the passive object (animated by the viewer) and of the active object (animated from “within”). Thus the disparity between the object’s and the institution’s significations is performed by the object—the toy—itsself. As a result, the surface joke—the used toy in the white cube—functions to break down the illusion of transcendent subjectivity through which the viewed is subordinated to the viewer: the toy objectifies the viewer by performing him/her.

In subject-object relations, the toy is animated as a performing body through the subject’s projections. In psychology, it corresponds to the transitional object. According to D.W. Winnicott, the transitional object is an infant’s first “not-me” possession. It serves to transition the infant into the world of objects, but it is neither of nor other to the infant. It symbolizes, rather, “the place in space and time where and when the mother is in transition from being (in the baby’s mind) merged in with the infant and alternatively being experienced as an object to be perceived rather than conceived of.”² Stuffed toys occupy the in-between space as simultaneous

² D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London and New York: Tavistock Publications, 1980), 96.

subjects and objects—as me and not-me. When the subject advances from child to adult object relations, he/she abandons the animated toy. Thus, faced with the toy, the adult subject reanimates it through a reserve of archived performances. The used toys from the *Half a Man* exhibition are animated from two separate points: from the viewer’s position (structured by past experience) and from the toys’ implied pasts. They therefore reflect the viewer only to the extent that the viewer can—or wants to—project onto them. The dynamic allows the viewer simultaneously to identify with the toys and to instate a subject-object hierarchy which ensures the ascendance of the self above the other.

The “Dialogues” complicate the subject-object hierarchy, because the toys speak, and because they speak themselves as transcendent. Kelley’s discourse of disembodiment proposes the toys as subjects “independent” of the viewer, thus denigrating the viewer’s role in the performance and short-circuiting the hierarchy. Not only is the viewer denied as originary source of the performance—and therefore of the toy’s subjectivity—but the performance relegates the viewer to the role of passive recipient, a mute mirror of the toys’ spoken subjectivity. In theory, then, the “Dialogues” are self-sufficient. The viewer activates the joke—the disparity between the discourse and the speaker—but as an abstract referent. In practice, however, the viewer is both referent and target—a mirror of the banal bodies in the “dialogue,” pretending at transcendence. As a result, the “Dialogues” undermine the empathetic bond that the toys themselves prompt 1) by usurping the viewer’s voice, and 2) by exposing the viewer as object.

By assuming the viewer’s voice, the toy attempts to supersede the viewer as sovereign subject. Inevitably, the toy fails because its voice mimics the viewer’s, it does not eliminate it. More significant to the empathetic “exchange” is the toy’s denial, via the discourse, of its embodiment. By denying its body, the toy disavows the necessary surface for the viewer’s

projections. In this sense, the toy's visible, material, and forever inanimate form is overruled: in as much as the toy posits its transcendence, it also refuses to perform in the viewer's image and thus to cohere him/her as subject. By exposing the viewer as object, the toy in effect plays Medusa to the viewer's Perseus. The disembodied gaze through which the viewer, in Lacanian terms, captures the object is captured and returned by the toy's discursive pose of disembodiment. And as he/she receives it, "the gaze," in Hal Foster's words, "mortifies this subject."³ That is, the viewer is simultaneously the viewed. Kelley's speaking toys precisely mortify the subject (the viewed), but the mortification does more than just expose the viewer as the viewed. The "Dialogues" spectacularize the body in performance—in its absurd juxtaposition with its dirty, used body, the discourse paradoxically hyperbolizes the speaker's objectness. And because the viewed parodies the viewer, its objectness projects back onto the viewer. In other words, if the returned gaze establishes the viewer as viewed, as in effect a subjectified object (or an objectified subject), the toys annihilate the cogito altogether: the viewer is no more than a ramshackle thing, the punchline to the joke of his/her own subjectivity.

Kelley was just one artist in the 1980s and '90s to graft the concept of the performing body onto the inanimate object—John Welchman notes specifically his dialogue with Haim Steinbach and the latter's slick stuffed bears.⁴ However, the wry theoretical posturing that undergirded the commodity object's performance in the '80s (and, frequently, revealed the artists' fantasies of disembodiment), is imploded in Kelley's toys by the physicality of the object, and by the ramifications of the abject. The abject, as it has been applied to Kelley, is drawn from the theories of Georges Bataille and Julia Kristeva. Kristeva understands abjection both as a process

³ Hal Foster, "Obscene, Abject, Traumatic," *October*, Vol. 78 (Autumn, 1996), 106.

⁴ John C. Welchman, "The Mike Kelleys," *Mike Kelley* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1999), 71.

(to abject) and as a state (to be abject), the latter of which is attached to a referent.⁵ Conversely, Bataille conceives of abjection as an abstraction, that which defies naming. Yet, the two theories overlap to the extent that they both assign the concept to the realm of the “low.” As a result, the abject is easily reduced to waste matter, thus Kelley and Bataille have typically been associated based on their mutual preoccupation with scatology and substances. The “Dialogue” toys cite Bataille’s and Kristeva’s abject obliquely, as avatars of lowness. Here, however, the abject is an entry point into Bataille’s theory of heterology, “[t]he science [study] of what is completely other.”⁶ In heterology, all human impulses are codified through a dialectical process of appropriation and excretion represented by the poles of homogeneity and heterogeneity. The homogeneous accounts for all socialized structures (e.g., religion, politics). The heterogeneous is all that cannot be appropriated, the “irreducible waste products.”⁷ By performing a structural opposition between high and low, the “Dialogues” enact the dialectic: the discourse performs as homogeneous; the toys, as alien to the discourse, perform as heterogeneous. Yet, Bataille also emphasizes the paradox of theorizing the heterogeneous, which is “resolutely placed outside the reach of scientific knowledge, which by definition is only applicable to homogeneous elements.”⁸ The heterogeneous occurs through a process of negation. By this logic, its literalization results in its immediate appropriation. In this sense, then, the material toys are denied as heterogeneous just as the discourse denies, through negation, their homogeneity.

⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

⁶ Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. and trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 102.

⁷ Bataille, 96.

⁸ Ibid.

The paradox—that the toys at once cannot and cannot *not* be appropriated—problematizes any uncritical identification between Kelley and Bataille, as it problematizes any application of Bataille’s dialectic to the world of material objects. But it does not invalidate the association. The dialectic functions here as a concept in performance; the toys perform a symbolic expulsion of the socialized body of the viewer/institution to a ruptured space, to sit alongside of all the ineffable matter that lies in homogeneity’s wake. In the “Dialogues,” the viewer’s attempt to animate the toy—to appropriate it via projected subjectivity—faces off with the object’s performance of the appropriated subject. Both actions play at the subject’s coherence—first, in the subject’s (imagined) capacity to animate the object and second in the object’s pose of transcendent subjecthood. But the latter outperform the former by literally speaking over it. Furthermore, both actions are carried out through the body of the object, subjectified only via projection and projecting its make-believe subjectivity onto the body of the viewer. As a result, the empathetic bond is perverted into a mutual expulsion. The object’s parody reciprocates the subject’s animating gaze, but on the object’s terms: as a masquerade, a veil of transcendence over an intrusive body—always other to the subject it sustains. The inverse of the mask, in which an absence is veiled by a presence, the toys expose the futility of the invisible as a mask for the visible. When the veil of transcendence falls away, subjectivity eviscerates and the object becomes master.

The toys in *Empathy Displacement: Humanoid Morphology* (1990) and *Craft Morphology Flow Chart* (1991) exploit the same empathetic impulse as those in the “Dialogues”: they coerce the viewer into an exchange in which she simultaneously projects onto and absorbs the object. In both projects, Kelley turns the performativity of the toys against the viewer, as he does in the “Dialogues.” Here, though, he turns it also against the toys themselves. According to Kelley, the

two projects were a response to audience projections of infantile recidivism and assumptions of abuse—to the toys and to Kelley. He reacted, in Elisabeth Sussman’s words, by “killing” them.⁹

In the *Empathy Displacement* series, the toys are laid to rest in black wood boxes on the gallery floor, in front of large black and white illustrations. In *Craft Morphology Flow Chart*, the toys are exposed again, but as specimens, organized by type (sock monkeys, rag dolls, etc.) on thirty-two folding tables and accompanied by sixty illustrations in which the height and characteristics of the types are detailed. In both cases, the treatment of the toys, and their juxtaposition with the illustrations, serves to sever the illusory relationship between the viewer and the viewed. By “killing” the toys, Kelley establishes a dynamic in which they refuse the viewer’s projected animation—not as sovereign subjects (as in the adult play of the “Dialogue” toys), but as objects. The result is that the toys are both inanimate and insubordinate; the pathos thus issues from the viewer’s attempted resuscitation of the inanimate object as a dead (mortal) subject.

In the *Empathy Displacement* series, Kelley confounds the viewer-viewed exchange by substituting for the (visible) toy the box and the oversized illustration. The visual correlation between the box and a casket is emphasized by its black paint, but the unadorned box and its repetition in the installation, undercuts the singularity of the corpse/toy inside. The illustration, by contrast, has two opposing effects: it desublimates the toy as object and it memorializes the toy as (now-transcendent) subject. It desublimates by confronting the viewer with the objectness of the subjectified toy. The toy’s being is a phantasm of the viewer’s identification: its received subjectivity is circumscribed by and reflexive of the viewer. Blown up and deadpan, the

⁹ Elisabeth Sussman, “Introduction,” *Mike Kelley: Catholic Tastes*, ed. Elisabeth Sussman (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993), 32.

illustration exposes the toy as alien and anathema to the human viewer, like the Stay Puft marshmallow man in *Ghostbusters*. No longer a submissive surface for the viewer's projections, then, it becomes object-residual and expelled by the subject. At the same time, the illustration memorializes the toy. By reasserting the toy's being against the absence of the box, the image, as Jones writes of photography's "fetishizing aspect," "desire[s] to retrieve or maintain the past in the present."¹⁰ Together, the two parts perform a silent elegy that traces the absence of the material toy. Jones continues, "[I]n spite of its obvious promise of delivering an unmediated, indexical image of the real or of the deep emotional thoughts and feelings of its maker ... it is also an inexorable sign of loss and absence."¹¹

The juxtaposition therefore invokes the toy, but as a symbolic performer, in Lacanian terms, as a lost object of desire (*l'objet a*).¹² According to Lacan, the object of desire is conjured when an infant enters the stage of the symbolic; the subject becomes subject in relation to an unattainable Other. The object of desire signifies the subject's fundamental lack. It exists—as an other, but also as integral to the subject—precisely because it cannot be attained. In other words, it confirms the subject through absence: by circumscribing his/her lack, it imagines his/her coherence. The transitional object is the inverse of the desired object: it confirms the subject through presence, as a material surface onto which the subject projects his/her desire. It relates to the object of desire as the infant's supplement: for example, a blanket corner supplements for the

¹⁰ Amelia Jones, "The 'Eternal Return': Self-Portrait Photography as a Technology of Embodiment," *Signs*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (Summer, 2002), 953.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Lacan advances this theory in Seminar 11 of *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller and trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978).

mother's breast.¹³ Both objects (transitional and desire), however, are founded on the same lack; thus as the transitional object supplements for the lack, it also perpetuates it. So while the toy in the *Empathy Displacement* series maintains its empathetic lure as phantom transitional object, its absence redoubles the void left by the original object of desire. The transgressive effect of the piece thus emerges from this paradox: the toy, which performs as a phantasmatic extension of the viewer to compensate for the object of desire, is disembodied, but not gone. It stands in the impossible position, as simultaneously unattainable object and transitional object. Or, rather, the viewer has the impossible task of animating a phantom to subrogate for a void. Furthermore, the surrogate objects engage the viewer's projected empathy in an antagonistic showdown. The (formerly) embodied toy is denied its body, but its significations are suspended and remapped onto two closed surfaces, thus performing the toy as a refusal. And because the toy's performance is the viewer's, the viewer's subjectivity is splintered and confirmation of the self is, along with empathy, bounced into a mis-en-abyme of perpetual misrecognitions.

The toy does reemerge in material form a year later, in *Craft Morphology Flow Chart*. However, Kelley now exploits it from the other side: that of the pure object. Again, the project served to annul the empathetic lure of the toys, here re-presented, according to Sussman, "as if they were dead bodies in a morgue."¹⁴ But, as opposed to the transcendent transitional object in *Empathy Displacement*, which "displaces" its projected subjectivity into an absence, the toys in *Craft Morphology* are desubjectified via accumulation and taxonomic organization. Here, the toy is appropriated (per Bataille) into the socialized sphere of the specimen. Its humanoid features are still manifest; but as object-type, it deflects empathetic projection in the same way that the

¹³ Winnicott gives this example in *Playing and Reality*.

¹⁴ Sussman, 33.

photograph, for Walter Benjamin, deflected the art object's aura.¹⁵ Its use-value is located now in its form, rather than in its projected subjectivity—its potential for reproduction is infinite.

Yet, as Sussman's statement indicates, it is specifically the correlation between the corpse and the specimen that impels *Craft Morphology's* performance. The toy here is dually unsettling. It plays dead—Sussman refers to the installation as an “afterlife.”¹⁶ But its death is alien, that of the other. In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva writes,

In that compelling, raw, insolent thing in the morgue's full sunlight, in that thing that no longer matches and therefore no longer signifies anything, I behold the breaking down of a world that has erased its borders: fainting away. The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. ... Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us.¹⁷

Following Kristeva, the toy as corpse interpellates the viewer; it absorbs him/her in its death. In this sense, Kelley's proposal that the installation sever the empathetic bond is less an effect of the toys' desubjectification than of their projection of death onto the subject.

More significantly, however, the toys deny the empathetic bond by defying the terms of death. Kristeva's concept of the corpse predicates its abjection, as a “body without soul, a non-body,”¹⁸ on its past life: just as the corpse proves non-body through its decay, it also proves human—as Foster writes, “It [the abject] is a phantasmatic substance not only alien to the subject, but intimate with it—too much so, in fact.”¹⁹ The toys, in contrast, are the ultimate alien bodies, deaths without decay. They continue to elicit empathy, via their visibility in the installation. But they refuse to reciprocate as live subjects, and they refuse to die. What Kelley thus instates is a

¹⁵ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility,” *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol. 2, part 2, 1931-1934*, eds. Howard Eiland and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2005).

¹⁶ Sussman, 33.

¹⁷ Kristeva, 4.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 109.

¹⁹ Foster, 114.

perverse foil to the empathetic bond: the toys perform as immortal. The immortal body is paradoxically neither a (human) life nor a corpse. It denies all that it embodies, all soul, all nature. Non-state upon non-state, it abjects itself into infinity. Here, the role of the immortal body is also that of the specimen, redoubled by the taxonomic process. By using homemade toys in his craft pieces, Kelley conjures the illusion of an original performance, of which the mass commodity is incapable. The taxonomy calls into question the significations of the homemade toy by positing the same originality as replicable. The toy thus becomes both victim of Kelley's ethnological profiling and other to its (fictive) subjectivity. Above all it gives the *individuality* of the subject—the toy or the viewer—over to the *particularity* of the subject-type. Finally, it consumes our subjectivity in a hall of mirrors that ends when the bond is severed, and ends in our own illusions.

In his work with Repressed Memory Syndrome (RMS) and False Memory Syndrome (FMS), Kelley inverts the performative structure of the craft pieces by replacing the absolute presence of the used toy with an absence in space through which the banal is reimagined as a site of repressed trauma. The work culminated with the 1995 exhibition *Towards A Utopian Art Complex* and, specifically, the exhibition's centerpiece "Educational Complex." An architectural model of all of the schools Kelley had ever attended, along with his childhood home, "Educational Complex" is a sprawling structure composed from photographs and some floor plans, and from memory. Kelley addressed RMS by blocking off all of the areas he had forgotten; the blocked spaces—which account for approximately eighty percent of the complex—are posed as the sites of his repressed trauma.²⁰

²⁰ Mike Kelley, "Architectural Non-Memory Replaced With Psychic Reality," *Minor Histories: Statements, Conversations, Proposals*, ed. John C. Welchman (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004), 318.

Kelley fetishizes the architectural absences in Educational Complex by paralleling them with absences in memory; each absence equals a repressed trauma, and, conversely, each repressed trauma compensates for a lack (in memory). According to the terms of RMS/FMS, however, the victim only knows the trauma as an absence—as, in effect, a non-memory. Furthermore, the dynamic outlined by RMS—negative (absence of the memory) signifies the trauma by erasing positive (presence of the memory)—fails to register the ambiguity of the memorial space. Absence in memory neither proves nor disproves the presence of a trauma, it plays the lacuna in the space. Kelley heightens the ambiguity by reinscribing the significations of the architectural absences. In other words, he exchanges an absence for an absence. The act of appointing the absences as sites of repressed trauma has an obvious semiotic function: the utterance (i.e., that which I've forgotten must be trauma) weights the “empty” signifier (space) with an invisible menace. The words reify the trauma without materializing it; they re-presents the “nothing” as its inverse, the black hole.

Kelley's semiotic subterfuge introduces the performative dimension into the work. Non-memory is weighted with the implications of trauma, as it is in RMS. But, in the place of the “real” repression is a sort of spectral theater, a performance of the sinister crystallized in the absence of the thing itself (the repressed). In addition, the emphasis on space underscores the performative dimension of the two types of space here, architectural and memorial. Architectural space is fundamentally performative (as Kippenberger demonstrated) in the sense that it accommodates and interacts with the body. Memorial space produces its own fluid architecture in which its parameters are perpetually renegotiated and its framework is under construction. “Educational Complex” visualizes memorial architecture; as a “spatialized” memory it stages its failed theater, memory's forever compromised performance of its phantasmatic object “reality.”

Kelley further theatricalizes the space by introducing the screen memory. In Freudian terms, the screen memory is a narrative (spatial for Kelley; temporal for Freud) authored by the subject and understood as the genuine event.²¹ For the RMS sufferer, the screen memory supplants the trauma. In “Educational Complex,” the screens are Kelley’s memories of the structures, which he describes as “too perfect, the scenes are too staged to be real. They must be implanted fictions.”²² The screen memory here symbolically splits the architectural and memorial space into a background (the trauma) and a foreground (the screen). But because the traumas in “Educational Complex” are faked, both the “background” and the “foreground” are performed; the background is a foundational fiction and the foreground is the “implanted fiction,” literalized in the anatomy of the structure (minus the blocked spaces).

FMS inverts the structure of RMS in regards to the screen memory. In RMS the screen memory blocks the trauma. In FMS, by contrast, the recovered trauma (the trauma must be “recovered” to constitute FMS) *is* the screen memory; it blocks the reality that no trauma occurred. “Educational Complex” fuses the two. The “remembered” architecture—for which the inaccurate layout signifies the screen memory—and the blocked spaces—for which no memory remains—are both facades for the absence of trauma. The same memorial void underpins FMS; in “Educational Complex,” however, the trauma is not recovered, thus the structure is three-tiered: absence (repression)>presence (trauma)>absence (reality). “Educational Complex” therefore deploys spatial absence and presence in order to simultaneously perform repression and trauma—and both are performed as (deliberate) surrogates for the lost object of the banal. Kelley’s strategy, then, inextricably links the unknown—or worse, the unknown trauma—to the realm of the

²¹ Sigmund Freud, “Screen Memories,” *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press Ltd., 1962).

²² Kelley, 321.

banal. The trauma and its repression together theatricalize the dark matter of the unconscious, like a play staged behind the curtain, but both exist only in (symbolic) contrast to Kelley's "real life." Simultaneously, the banal (Kelley's reality) exists in contrast to the (fictive) repressed trauma also through a process of negation: by manifesting as absence, the fiction (the repression) negates itself, thus positing, as its dialectical remainder, the reality. Yet precisely because the piece performs both fiction and reality as absences, it obscures the distinction between the two. Moreover, the biographical material and the lies are constructed from the same psychical matrix. As a result, "Educational Complex" collapses the bipoles of fiction and reality into a theatricalized Möbius strip.

Materially, the model uses the banal—"mundane institutional school buildings"—as a starting point for an impossible architecture, to "be seen," according to Kelley, "in relation to the tradition of utopian architecture."²³ He continues,

Ideological, or psychic, functions are clearly dominant over workaday concerns in fantasy architecture. In utopian projects, moral and aesthetic dimensions are presented, often openly and dramatically, as mirrors of each other. Of course, my project is a perversion of such an attitude: I present an obviously dystopian architecture, reflecting our true, chaotic social conditions, rather than some idealized dream of wholeness.²⁴

The model performs the dream space as an allegory for the real—yet it is a real made by memory, that is, a real which fails as a structural opposition to the dream. In the same way that memory constructs its architecture as a body in progress, the model posits the instability of real architectural space in memory (in his essay "Architectural Non-Memory Replaced With Psychic Reality," Kelley gives the example of his misrecollection of his elementary school) and the contingency between architectural space and the body with which it engages.²⁵

²³ Kelley, 319.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid, 318.

Phenomenologically, the exchange is produced by the subject-object binary which it seeks to undo: as Jones writes, “[W]e are both subject and object simultaneously, and our ‘flesh’ merges with the flesh that is the world.”²⁶ Here, the phenomenological dimension of architecture is exploited in order to be breached. In an essay on British postwar architecture, Adrian Forty writes,

Generally speaking, works of art are judged failures when they deny the subject any prospect of engagement or participation in them, when they are so closed off from experience as to appear empty and meaningless, when they offer nothing to edify us, nothing to uplift us in any moral or spiritual way. Customarily, art that denies any place whatsoever to the human subject, that forces the subject not even into a state of self-reflectiveness, but merely into a state of abject nothingness is considered to be a failure.²⁷

“Educational Complex” strategically overdetermines Forty’s position. The model’s utopian thrust issues from a modernist ideology of functionalism. The exterior locates the Cartesian subject as a product of a utopian education system, for which the architectural structure is the temple of the Logos. Simultaneously, the model’s interior—fragmented, blocked, nonfunctional—forecloses on the utopia promised by the exterior. The dynamic dislodges the chiasmic exchange from its own utopian center, in which the one and the other intertwine into a fleeting whole: where the exterior here opens to the (implied) body, the interior “denies” it. The interior, however, has its own implied bodies—the abusers and the abused, the failed bodies of the repressed trauma. The chiasmic bodies are here inverted into a flesh that strangulates as it intertwines.

But the dystopian interior fails as a counterpoint to the utopian exterior in the same way that the fictive and the real fail as symbolic antipodes—both found their performances on a

²⁶ Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 41.

²⁷ Adrian Forty, “Being or Nothingness: Private Experience and Public Architecture in Post-War Britain,” *Architectural History*, Vol. 38 (1995), 26.

slippery claim to truth. Utopian architecture necessarily opposes function because it can exist only in theory, and theoretical architecture accommodates only theoretical bodies. The model, then, fails as utopian due less to the secret of abuse than to its conflation of fiction and reality. Where utopia *and* dystopia transcend the real, “Educational Complex” enacts the real as a dissimulation. The model performs neither fiction nor reality *because* it performs both and, furthermore, because it performs at all. This is the point at which “Educational Complex” converges with the craft pieces. As the objects act upon the subject they propose a psychical beyond to the banal surfaces of used toys and school buildings. That is, they perform the banal precisely to constitute its other, and the other is not the unattainable real, but rather the phantasm of an extraordinary subject, traumatized, debased, usurped by the object and negated. The binary structure of theater—onstage/offstage—posits finally a subject that is complete in its negation, on the other side the performance. What Kelley’s works, and in particular “Educational Complex,” demonstrate, however, is that the other side *is* the surface refracted and revised by its performative architecture, always already appropriated because it is spoken by the performance. The fantasy of trauma, of negation, and of a subject that is naught, is for kids. And any sorry-assed performer can clean up and start again.

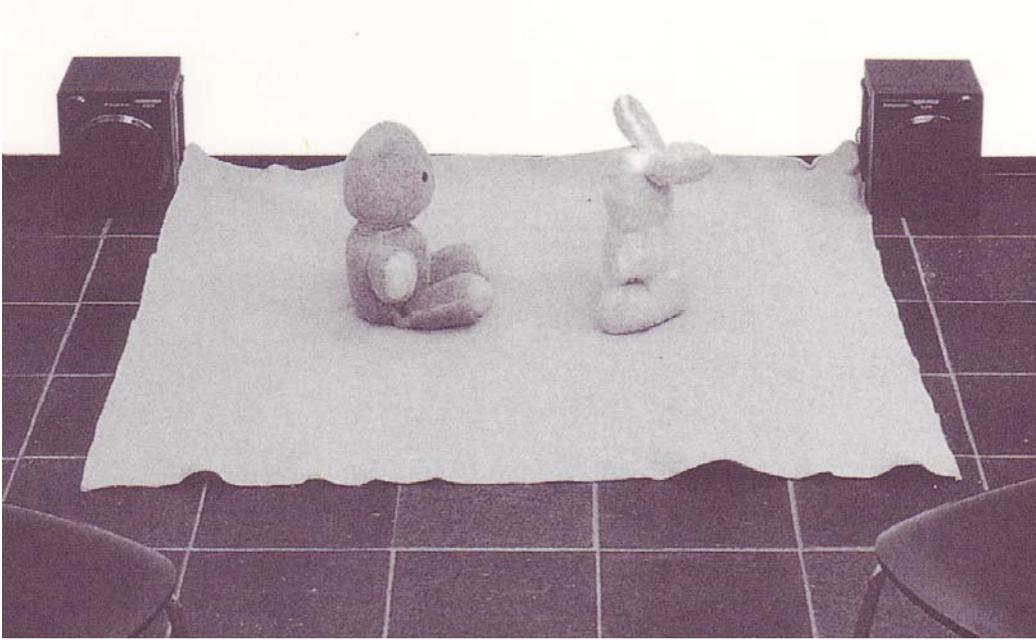


Figure 3.1. Mike Kelley, "Dialogue #1," 1991.



Figure 3.2. Mike Kelley, “Dialogue #5 (One Hand Clapping),” 1991.

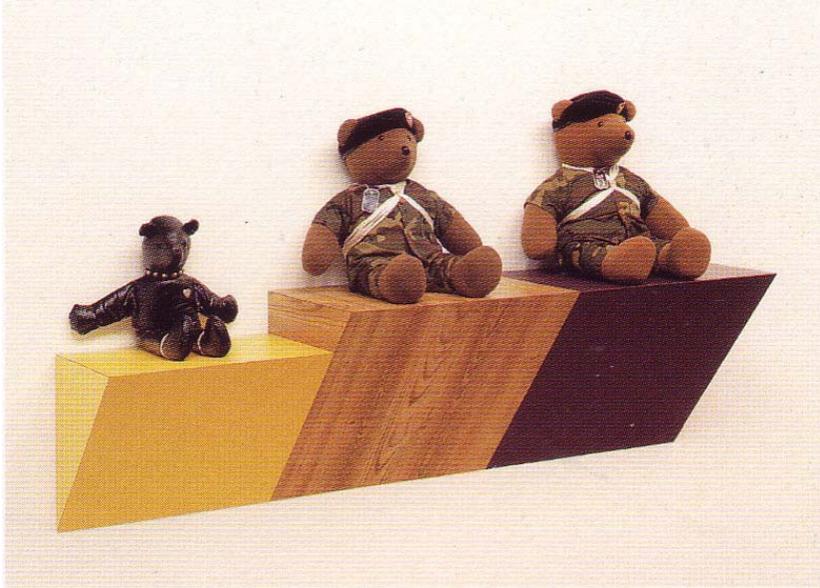


Figure 3.3. Haim Steinbach, *basics*, 1986, plastic laminated wood shelf, polyester, plastic and foam bears, vinyl bear.



Figure 3.4. Mike Kelley, *Empathy Displacement: Humanoid Morphology*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1991.

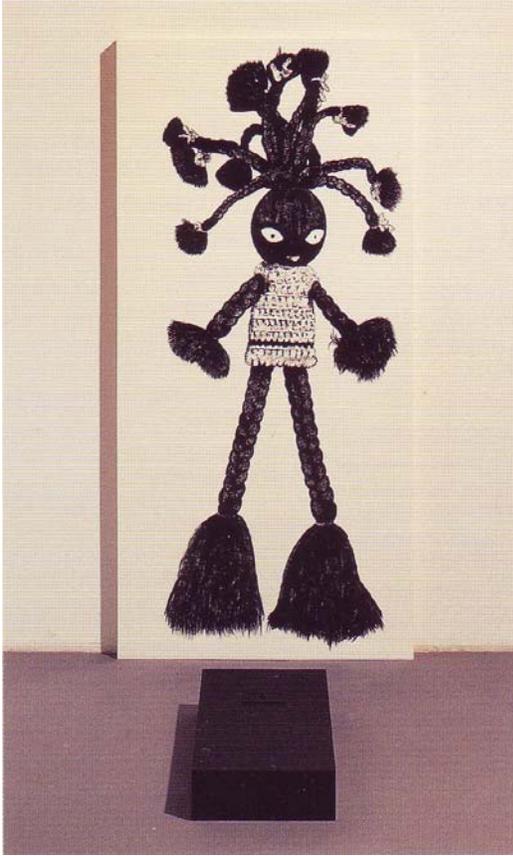


Figure 3.5. Mike Kelley, *Empathy Displacement: Humanoid Morphology*, detail.

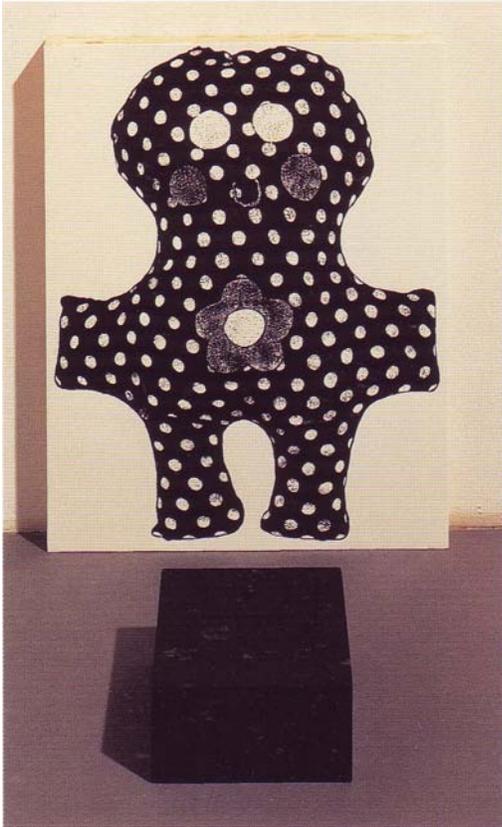


Figure 3.6. Mike Kelley, *Empathy Displacement: Humanoid Morphology*, detail.



Figure 3.7. Mike Kelley, *Craft Morphology Flow Chart*, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, 1991.

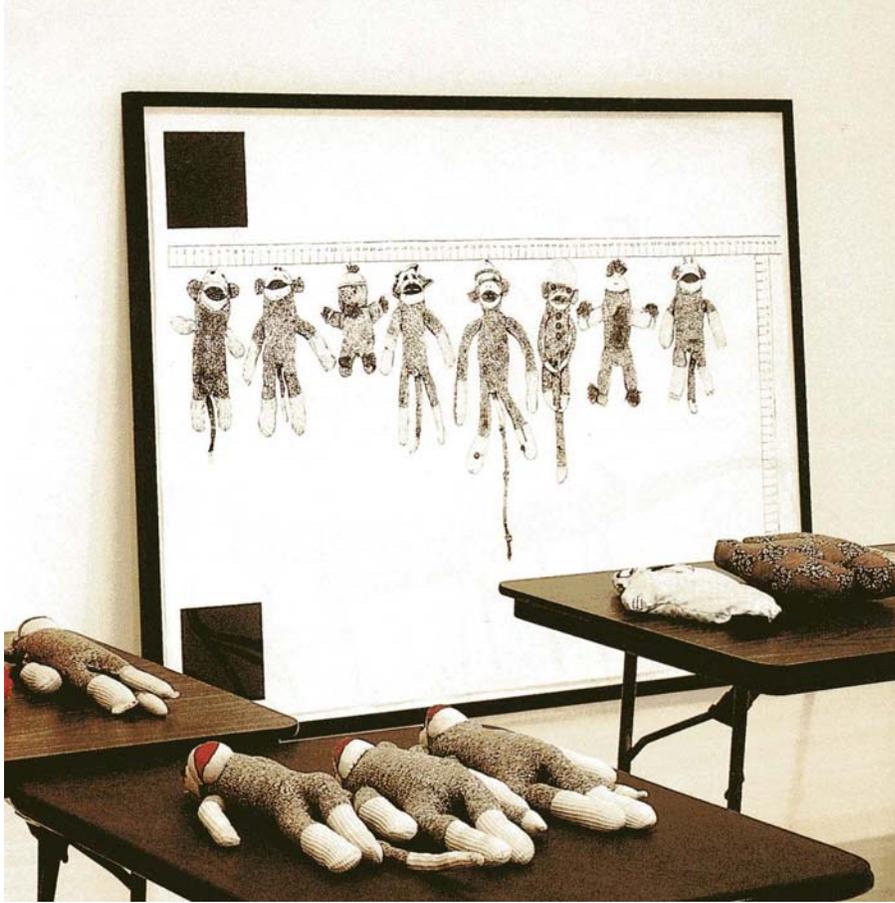


Figure 3.8. Mike Kelley, *Craft Morphology Flow Chart*, detail.



Figure 3.9. Mike Kelley, *Craft Morphology Flow Chart*, photograph.

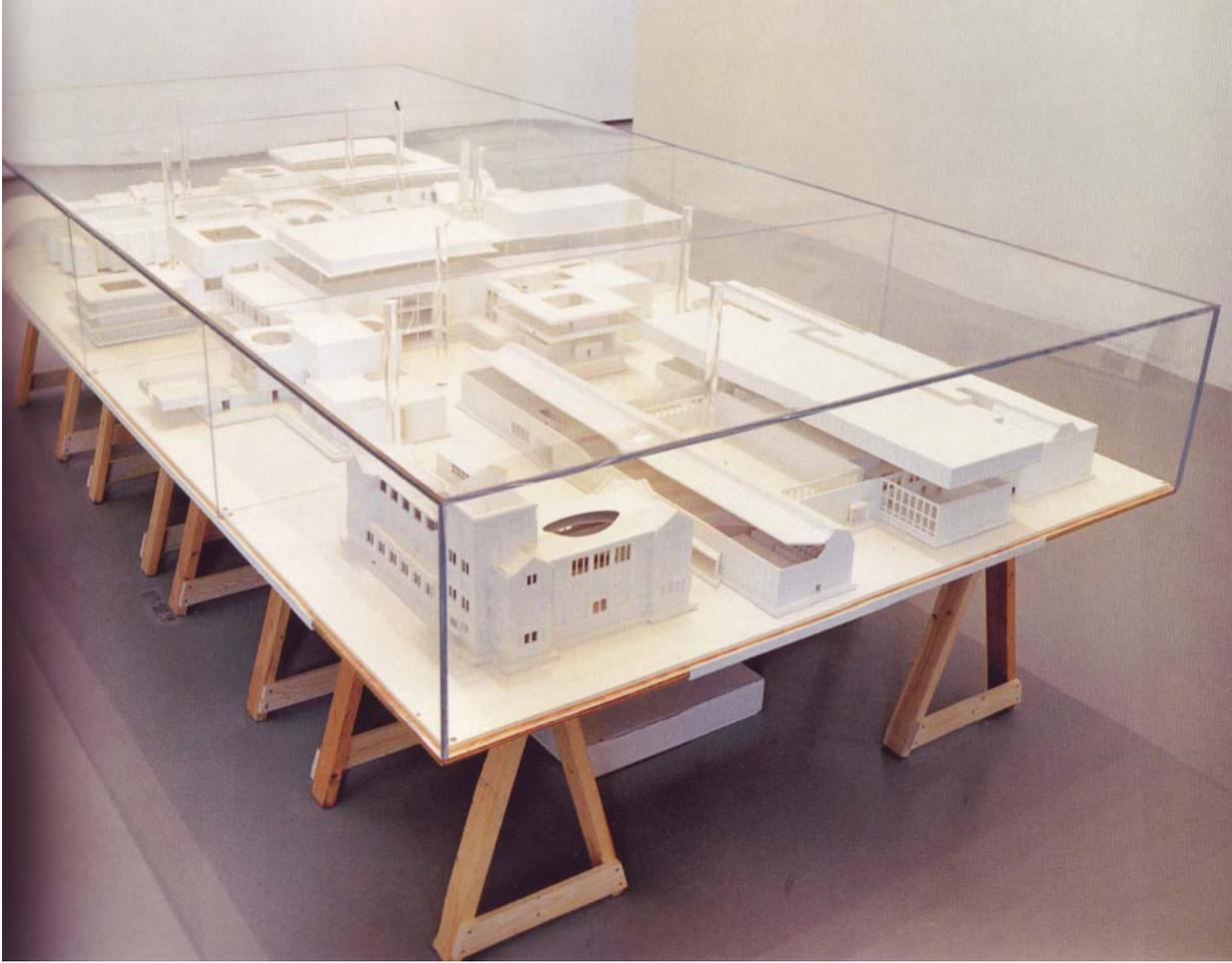


Figure 3.10. Mike Kelley, “Educational Complex,” 1995.

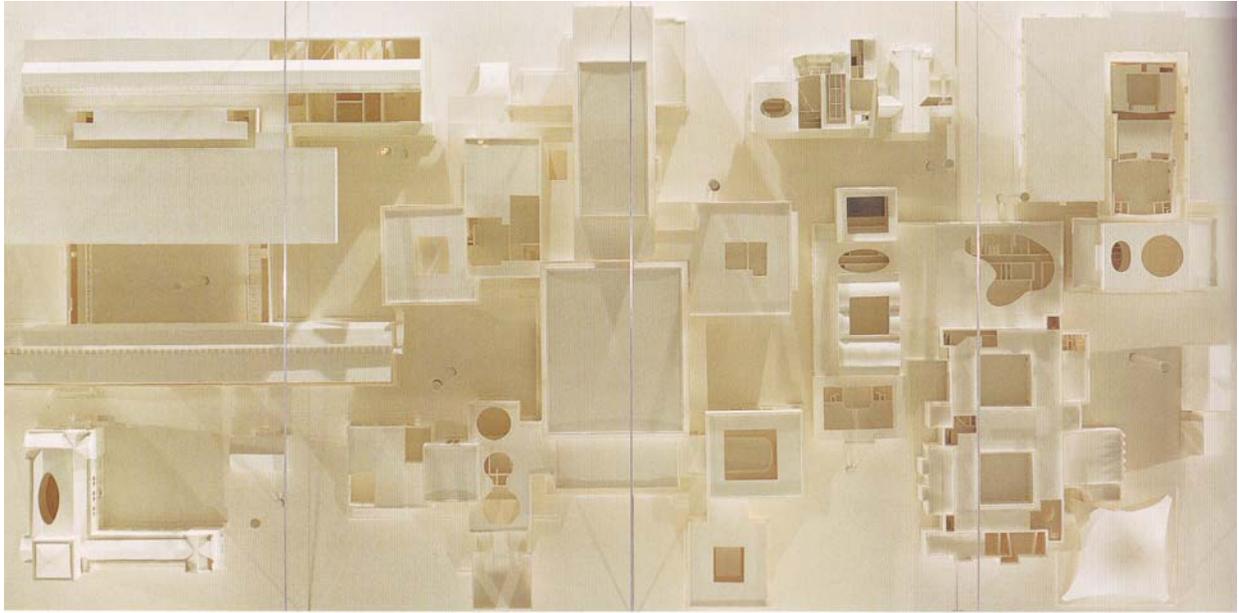


Figure 3.11. Mike Kelley, "Educational Complex," overhead view.

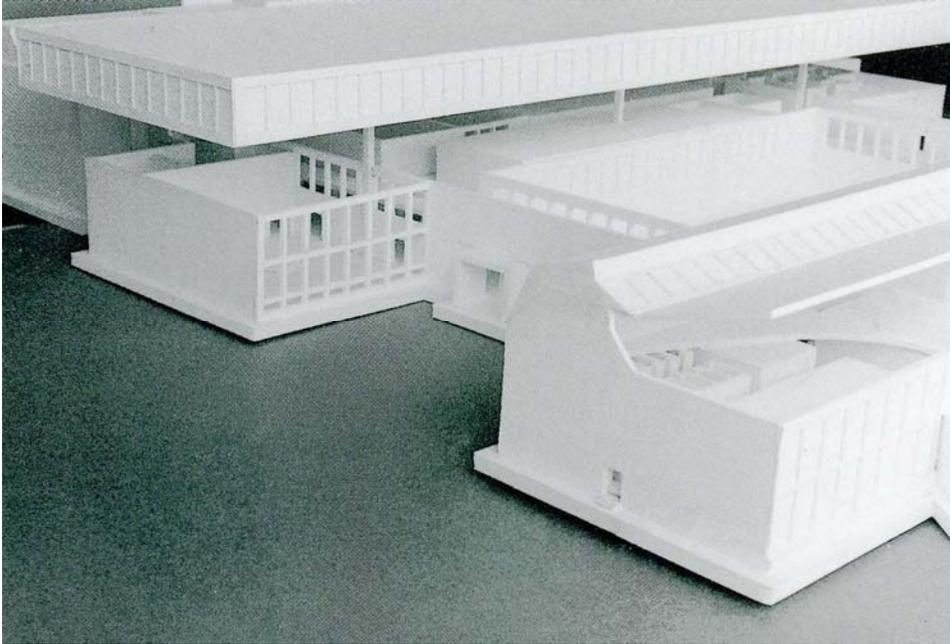


Figure 3.12. Mike Kelley, “Educational Complex,” detail.

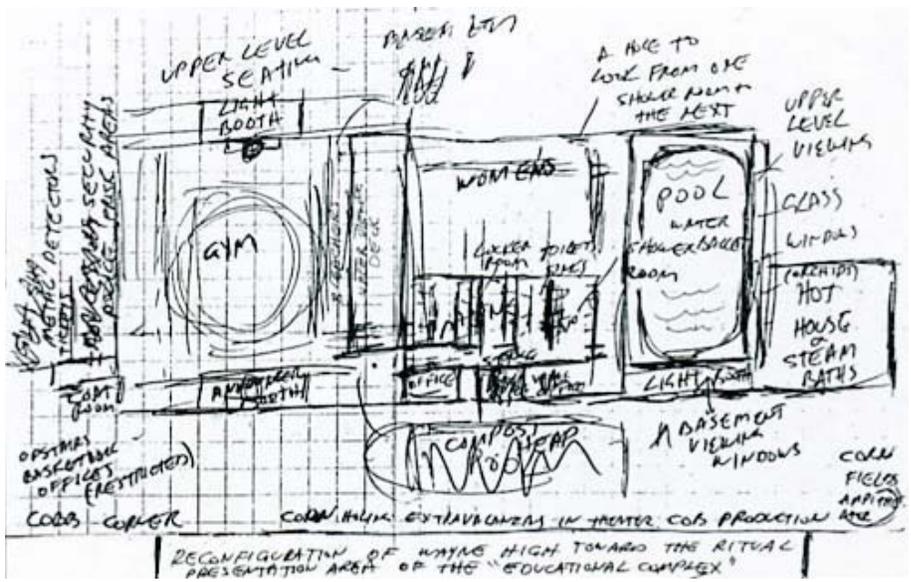


Figure 3.13. Mike Kelley, "Educational Complex" working drawing.

CHAPTER 4 SURVIVAL RESEARCH LABORATORIES' NIHILISTIC OBJECTS

[S]ince we have been denied the first [the Big Bang], we might as well put all our energies into accelerating the end, into hastening things to their definitive doom, which we could at least consume as spectacle.¹

Mark Pauline is the greatest performance artist in the United States, there's no doubt about it. He endangers people's lives, he threatens to kill people. I think it's what we need today. I think we should have more threats and more endangerment of human life.²

In February, 1979, Mark Pauline staged "Machine Sex," the first of over 50 performances under the name Survival Research Laboratories (SRL). Founded by Pauline in November 1978, SRL is a mechanized theater in which robotic machines and props, all made by the group from scavenged parts and secondhand technology, are pit against one another in a science-fiction spectacle of anarchic destruction. Over the years, Survival Research Laboratories has streamlined its machines and its productions. In 1988, Pauline's primary collaborator, Matthew Heckert, left the group and Eric Werner, another core collaborator, left soon after; Pauline, as artistic director, now works with an evolving group of collaborators. However, little has changed in the group's methodology since 1979. SRL productions coalesce the fields of performance art and weapons technology into a spectacle that foregrounds the antagonism between the two fields. The events are held in arenas or outdoors, and the pace and atmosphere parallel the theatricalized competition of sporting events or monster truck rallies. The machines themselves are DIY corruptions of yesterday's technology: flamethrowers, catapults and cannons, ram cars, crawling robotic insects, all cannibalized from used or obsolete machinery and weaponry. Parody, of performance art, of popular culture, of ritual violence and of military technology, informs the

¹ Jean Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End*, trans. Chris Turner (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992).

² Anonymous spectator, *A Scenic Harvest from the Kingdom of Pain*, VHS, directed by Jonathan Reiss and Joe Rees (San Francisco: SRL, 1984).

events, and an iconography of political subversion plays across the surface. Yet while the iconography evokes a political agenda, it evades a coherent position; ideology is subsumed in the directionless aggression of the fight, soundtracked by industrial music and absurd sound montages. The machines enact a toy apocalypse in which literal destruction is hyperbolized by its symbols (i.e., animal carcasses, smoke, flames, noise) and the combat ends when the machines are no longer operable.

Far more explicitly than Kippenberger's or Kelley's, SRL's objects perform. Pauline and his associates direct them with remotes, but the machines are the actors. Furthermore, the flawed technology of the projects, along with a degree of programmed "agency," engenders an uncanny choreography of erratic and apparently illogical movement and an illusion of incipient posthuman subjectivity. The more significant difference between SRL and Kippenberger or Kelley is located in the ideological position of the performance. As the previous chapters argue, Kippenberger and Kelley both exploit ideological structures: Kippenberger reproduces the structures and Kelley debases them. In contrast, SRL's machines perform their undoing. On the SRL website, the group describes itself as "an organization of creative technicians dedicated to re-directing the techniques, tools, and tenets of industry, science, and the military away from their typical manifestations in practicality, product or warfare."³ In other words, the performances direct their technology away from productive use, from the development of ideological structures, and toward the perversion of the structures into pure spectacle.

In a sense, then, the SRL performance is its own spectacular end—an analogue to film or TV. With film and TV, though, the spectacle is consumed as entertainment—and as entertainment it acquires its commodity status and thus its function in ideology. The SRL performance not only

³ Survival Research Laboratories, *Survival Research Laboratories Home Page*, 15 July 2006, <<http://www.srl.org>> (1 August 2006).

diverts its technology from “practicality, product or warfare,” but it undercuts the ideological organizations (specifically, the government and military) that engender the technology by severing production from intention, and it frustrates the spectacle’s consumption by disallowing its resolution in either entertainment or social critique. What results is a field of combat without cogito, a performance of negation. In *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche writes,

Radical nihilism is the conviction of an absolute untenability of existence when it comes to the highest values one recognizes; plus the realization that we lack the least right to posit a beyond or an in-itself of things that might be “divine” or morality incarnate. ... Existence has no goal or end; any comprehensive unity in the plurality of events is lacking: the character of existence is not “true,” is *false*. One simply lacks any reason for convincing oneself that there is a *true* world.⁴

The SRL machines reify Nietzsche’s definition by emptying actions of meaning, as a symbol of the “true world.” They sever the act of fighting from the ideological formations through which acts cultivate meaning by, in effect, isolating the gestures of fighting (e.g., violence, spectacle) in a sort of invisible fortress: an airless sphere forever sealed from the transcendent space of belief, like the Fortress of Solitude in which Superman preserved his home city Kandor. In contrast to Superman’s city, though, the SRL spectacle is deliberately alienated: the machines reject the fundamental rationale of ideology—that action is motivated by reason, or that effects are caused—by proposing a battleground in which the winner is irrelevant (if one emerges at all) and actions are freed of logic and consequence. As a consequence, the machines are additionally freed of (positive or negative) social productivity.

Baudrillard addresses a similar phenomenon in his analysis of chaotic form. He defines the “immanence of chaotic development” as “the unfolding of events which are themselves also without meaning and consequence and in which—with effects substituting themselves for causes—there are no longer any causes, *but only effects*. The world is there, *effectively*. There is no reason

⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. Walter Kaufman (New York: Random House, 1967), 9, 13.

for this, and God is dead.”⁵ In the SRL performances, the causes of violence are displaced by their spectacular effects—and logic, as the value of the effect, vanishes: the effect is no longer illogical; it just *is*. In *Extremely Cruel Practices: A Series of Events Designed to Instruct Those Interested in Policies That Correct or Punish* (Los Angeles, 1985), for example, a pig carcass is ripped in half by two machines; in *The Unexpected Destruction of Elaborately Engineered Artifacts* (Austin, 1997), a prop is affixed with a cartoon image of a boy and a girl riding bicycles; in a performance and installation at Area nightclub in New York (1985), political pictures are stabbed by a mechanized knife; and in various performances (including Area) Pauline’s guinea pig, Stu, operates a machine. The dominance of violence effaces the relative relations between political and potentially subversive symbols. Effects without cause construct an iconography without logic, thus, in David Graver’s words, “They [the machines] do not speak from a particular subject position, but, rather, quiver and shake like a demented body throes of fever or death.”⁶

The substitution of effects for causes suggests a slippage between postmodernism and nihilism: both oppose essentialism as a means of valuing the object. Yet where postmodernism attempts to undo the essentialist link between the signifier and the signified, and reveal it as arbitrary, nihilism bypasses the link, and rejects the ideological structures through which all signification is mediated as absurd. The SRL machines acknowledge the link as it is necessary to the performance of negation. The act of violence or destruction—specifically without cause—communicates as a negation (or at least a rejection) of social structures because it is encoded as aggressive. The negation is legible, then, but it is unspecific and without logic (*not* illogical). In

⁵ Baudrillard, *Illusion*, 121.

⁶ David Graver, “Violent Theatricality: Displayed Enactments of Aggression and Pain,” *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (Mar. 1995), 57.

this sense, aggression is no longer a cause for violence; it is an effect equivalent to violence. The “Flame Whistle/Boeing,” for example, is a Boeing jet reconstructed as a flamethrower with a police whistle attached, making it “the loudest flamethrower in history.”⁷ The combination of flames and noise creates a reciprocal circuit of aggression and violence in which neither term engenders the other, but they flow into one another, with no origin, as effects. In performance, the “Flame Whistle/Boeing” has two functions: it fights other machines and it produces flames and noise.

The former function remains in the realm of theater because it takes place without the before and after (cause and consequence) of the “real.” In fact, its nihilism is contingent on the theatrical anatomy of the fight. Inherently, the expression of nihilism conflicts with subjectivity: the futility of ideological structures can only be expressed through those structures, and, within the context of the real, any such expression is necessarily produced by a subject—a person already assimilated into the same structures. Thus the nihilist subject is inevitably a paradox. The SRL performance attempts to circumvent the paradox by unhinging the nihilistic expression from the realm of the real, and from the human subject. The performance neither rejects nor embraces the act of fighting: the fight is an effect—an acting out of gestures.

The latter function is also a fight, but one that alienates the machine from within: the volume of the police whistle serves to undercut the dynamic spectacle of the flames; the fire poses a visceral threat which subsumes the invisible threat of the noise. Each element undermines the other for a tension without reason that abolishes the coherence of the machine and detaches it from any productive (political, social) end in violence or aggression. Graver writes, “[U]nlike more conventional indictments of social justice, SRL’s spectacles do not allow

⁷ Survival Research Laboratories, “Flame Whistle,” 15 July 2006, <<http://www.srl.org/machines/flamewhistle/>> (1 August 2006).

their audience to rest comfortably with a self-righteous message. For SRL, violence takes precedence over social critique. ... The social critique gives discursive weight to the violence while the violence prevents the social critique from becoming a stable point from which to view the spectacle.”⁸

The difference between the SRL performance and a fight performed by human actors, for example in a play, is that the SRL violence is real (that is, the fight is actually violent, the performers are actually debilitated and/or destroyed). Violence is therefore deployed as both a threat and an act—aimed at the machines and, indirectly, at the audience—to subvert the spectacle of performance as it unfolds. The chaos of the show (i.e., noise, simultaneous and multidirectional activity, operators running on and off the “stage”) additionally subverts the spectacle and disrupts any narrative coherence. Yet where the live shows bury the complex of anti-narrative devices in the field of chaos, the 1988 video *A Bitter Message of Hopeless Grief* (staged in the SRL workshop and made specifically for recording), exposes it. The video comes closest to narrative in its suggestion of a fight between a snarling mechanized animal skeleton and the “Inchworm,” a crawling, scorpion-like robot with functional “arms”. The performance culminates when the “Inchworm” destroys a marginal machine and disappears into flames but the episode follows a fractured montage which dislocates the gestures in the video from their narrative matrix. The montage conflates the prehistoric (skeletons, cave, viscous carcasses) with the posthuman (the “Inchworm” and auxiliary machines, industrial music). It instigates a play of signifiers, but it signifies at less than zero; it erodes meaning.

⁸ Graver, *Violent Theatricality*, 57.

In this way, *Bitter Message* visualizes Baudrillard's "reversibility between the ending and the beginning."⁹ As Fredric Jameson writes in "Progress Versus Utopia; or, Can We Imagine the Future?" "[I]n order for narrative to project some sense of a totality of experience in space and time, it must surely know some closure (a narrative must have an ending, even if it is ingeniously organized around the structural repression of endings as such)."¹⁰ *Bitter Message* and the live performances are able to transpose beginnings and endings because they dismember narrative form. Narrative surfaces in the shows, in fights between machines, in the destruction of props by the machines, and in the disorienting choreography between movement and sound. However, it builds up just to collapse under its own entropy, as the machines perform an inversion of Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty, in which violence implodes the real.

In the past, Mark Pauline has established that the SRL performances are not meant to inflict any physical violence on the audience; to date, few viewers have been injured and none have been killed. The performance of "real" violence fails to confuse theater and "reality" because it never attempts to: the machines are manifestly machines. Rather, the performance appropriates the real into the theater. The violence still acts as an affront to the audience, but the affront is itself an effect—it serves no purpose. It is an inversion of entertainment and its mirror image, a theater of nihilism which succeeds because it reflects all that orbits it—all causality, all consequence, *all meaning*—as fiction. The machines correspond as actors. Within the show, they perform the "roles" (to the extent that the show allows for roles). Yet, as opposed to live actors, the machines have no other to the performed self: they exist in performance.

⁹ Baudrillard, *Illusion*, 121.

¹⁰ Fredric Jameson, "Progress Versus Utopia, or, Can We Imagine the Future?" *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 9 (1982), 148.

To exist in performance is to exist as a fully exteriorized thing—as an object. The machines perform as subjects in so far as they exploit their agency, to fight, to destroy, or, in Graver’s words, to “quiver and shake.” But the performance is absurd: no viewer mistakes the machines for conscious beings, and no one is expected to. Instead, the division between subject and object, as the machines enact it, invokes another division, between interior and exterior: the duality of the conscious self. The subject and the object are comparable in the sense that neither one can ultimately transcend his/her (or its) body. However, consciousness compels the subject to dream at transcendence. The illusion splits the subject between body and mind and thus forecloses on his/her transcendent wholeness. The object—the SRL machine, or any object—lacks the interiority produced by consciousness; without interiority it has no need for transcendence and it remains intact. Moreover, the object’s wholeness inverts the disembodied wholeness of the theoretical subject into a black hole which absorbs the expanse of consciousness into the object sphere. It closes to all that is not itself, it has no dreams, and as a result it exists—wholly and resolutely—at the center of a dead, Godless universe.

The SRL machine could thus conceivably be read as a commentary on the threat of technology. Furthermore, the group’s animal/machine hybrids—machines like Heckert’s “Mummy-Go-Round” (1982), in which “leaping” carcasses are mounted on a spinning carousel—suggest a subtext of moralism: theoretically, the animal’s subjugation is one step away from mankind’s subjugation to its own creation. The dystopianism embedded in the discourse of western science fiction upholds both positions. So evidently does Pauline’s assertion that “It’s just become more and more apparent that ... it’s how [people] deal with their creations that’s of significance and their lives have no significance at all. The more powerful the creations they make, the more they harness technology and nature, the more insignificant they’re gonna be and

the more death is gonna pass into that realm of instantaneousness.”¹¹ Pauline’s statement follows the logic that technological progress is mankind’s death knell; it ordains our capitulation to new and increasingly efficient forms of death. Yet he proposes another dimension to the position: man makes machine in order that machine may overtake man. Mankind can only truly be validated as creator by losing to machine—our coup is our ruin. Or, alternately, as William Fisher writes of *Blade Runner*, “The effective breakdown of *physis* and *nomos* has given birth to a man-made anti-environment that now exacts revenge from its creator.”¹²

Fisher points up one of the primary themes of dystopian science fiction and of SRL: the triumph of machine over man. The machine’s triumph posits a realm in which the machine not only asserts its “threateningly absolute exteriority”¹³ over man’s interiority, it also heralds the obsolescence of interiority. The conquest provokes a chain through which all of mankind’s ideological structures are systematically inverted according to the machine. Mortality is neutralized because the machine can rebuild itself. God, as man’s “will to power,”¹⁴ dies because the concept is absurd to the machine; and alongside God dies all belief systems, beginning with the one closest: Cartesian subjectivity, which empowers man to subordinate the machine. Theoretically, the machine’s triumph is represented in the SRL show by the absence of human actors—the machines are the main attraction. Outside of *Bitter Message* (along with some edited videos of live performances), though, the group never completely veils its presence: Pauline and his associates are visible as ancillary players, entering the arena to fix malfunctioning machines,

¹¹ *The Virtues of Negative Fascination: 5 Mechanized Performances*, VHS, directed by Jon Reiss (San Francisco: SRL, 1986).

¹² William Fisher, “Of Living Machines and Living-Machines: Blade Runner and the Terminal Genre,” *New Literary History*, Vol. 20, No. 1, Critical Reconsiderations (Autumn, 1998), 193.

¹³ Graver, *Violent Theatricality*, 54.

¹⁴ Nietzsche’s phrase seems an appropriate way to characterize man’s ideological relation to God, but I do not mean to directly implicate Nietzsche in my use of it.

to fire cannons, or to reposition props. Yet the collective presence of the machines dominates over the human presence. Particularly in early shows, efforts to control the machines by remote are undermined by the machines' "temperament"—their improvised actions which result from the crude technology, but translate live as a crude artificial intelligence. In more recent shows, the machines are programmed to act semi-independently from their operators. The process initiates a self- (and subject-)defeating cycle in which mankind is christened as God by creating a machine which topples man's gods.

Mankind's concession to the machine often plays out in science-fiction as a delusional master-slave dialectic: the machine takes control by promising to improve the master. The SRL machines perform technology's promise to man of super powers, slave labor or immortality through a sort of "atrocities exhibition," to use J.G. Ballard's phrase, but with the defused macabre of an Alice Cooper cabaret show.¹⁵ The animal-machine hybrid mocks both the man-machine ideal that haunts modernist science fiction and the utopian gesture of reviving the dead; technology again triumphs because the machine is necessary for the animal's "reanimation." (In one performance, for example, a rabbit called the "Rabot" is shocked so that it spasms; in another, a kinetic machine is covered with a cow carcass.) Here, the resurrected is reimagined as a putrid Lazarus, and the machine performs simultaneously as Dr. Frankenstein—the creator—and as his undead creation. The animal-machines further theatricalize the failed ideal as they lumber and convulse through repeated "deaths." The multiple deaths collapse the animal into the object's cycle of planned obsolescence by performing it as always already obsolete—dead before it hits the stage. More than the machine, then, the animal is the locus of SRL's nihilism. It acts as both metaphor for mankind and as an avatar of the social structures which, like the technology of the

¹⁵ I am referring here to Ballard's novel. J.G. Ballard, *The Atrocities Exhibition* (San Francisco, CA: RE/SEARCH, 1990).

machines, are redirected from their productive function. Food products or pets are denied as physical or mental nourishment; the life is rekindled by the machines strictly to be destroyed.

That death and destruction are equivalent terms in the SRL show is a symptom of the performers' disengagement from the potential ramifications of their effects—death itself is an effect, not a mourning. Simultaneously, destruction is emptied of its meaning because the machines and props destroying (or attempting to destroy) one another are made from obsolete technology. But where obsolescence signals a transition, from one object's term to another, the destruction of technology, in very practical terms, equates a destruction of mankind's means of survival. Or, rather, as the secondhand machines signify mankind's self-made obsolescence as a species which perpetually seeks to outdo itself, the destruction of technology, in effect, signifies a self-destruction.

The dystopia is a vivid allegory for science fiction's leitmotif of pathological technology. Its imagery articulates an apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic sphere inextricably entwined with the Judeo-Christian foundations underpinning western ideology, wherein the apocalypse is the final act before all existence bifurcates, for better (utopia) or worse (dystopia). According to Jameson, western culture's contemporary fascination with utopia stems from our inability to imagine it. He argues that utopias are created in fiction as means of problematizing their creation.¹⁶ The dystopian imagination follows the same recuperative impulse. The dystopia is not the result of our failure to imagine utopia, it equals utopia; and as its antipode, it equally escapes us. Within this formation utopia and dystopia are opposite sides of the same ideological fabric. By importing the dystopian imagination into a fictitious—and meaningless—sphere, SRL allows for a dystopia freed from ideology and morality—in other words, a dystopia freed from utopia. As a

¹⁶ Jameson, 156.

result, the show denies the potential for salvation implicit in the ideological dystopia. It invokes the moral subtext of dystopia—the apocalypse myth—strictly to destroy it.

The actual SRL show performs its “apocalypse” like a B-movie performs its drama: the inherent impossibility of visualizing the apocalypse, which undermines any production, is comically foregrounded in the chaos of sputtering machines, directionless pyrotechnics and a sort of funhouse light- and sound-show. The gloss of the spectacle, though, is peripheral to the attack. The machines are able to destroy the symbols of apocalypse because they destroy its logic: death, to machines, is neither real nor unreal; “the nihilist question ‘for what?’” as Nietzsche puts it, is no longer even posed.¹⁷ In *The Illusion of the End*, Baudrillard writes, “Our Apocalypse is not real, it is *virtual*. And it is not in the future, it is *here and now*.”¹⁸ He follows a similar arc in “Fatal Strategies”: “The sadistic irony of catastrophe is that it secretly awaits for things, even ruins, to regain their beauty and meaning only to destroy them once again. It is intent upon destroying the illusion of eternity, but it also plays with that illusion, since it fixates things in an alternate eternity.”¹⁹

The mythical apocalypse is the production of absolutes, of irrevocable ends and rebirths. The SRL machines deploy a rhetoric of annihilation which gives rise to a virtual apocalypse that is not Baudrillard’s simulacral model, but one without want of even a simulacral God—played by machines, and replayed at will. The strategy extricates the machines from the ideology through which their destruction is marked as “fake”. Their end is meaningless and reversible, but within

¹⁷ Nietzsche, *Will*, 16.

¹⁸ Baudrillard, *Illusion*, 119.

¹⁹ Jean Baudrillard, “Fatal Strategies,” *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 200.

their context (or, per Baudrillard, their “alternate eternity”) it is literal; and they perform their own resurrections.

Specifically, the destruction of the apocalypse is located in the machines’ capacity to repeat it. In his essay on pop art, “That Old Thing Art,” Barthes contends that the stakes of repetition are

[T]he destruction of art but also (moreover, they go together) another conception of the human subject ... the Warholian subject (since Warhol is a practitioner of these repetitions) abolishes the pathos of time in him[/her]self, because this pathos is always linked to the feeling that something has appeared, will die, and that one’s death is opposed only by being transformed into a second something which does not resemble the first.²⁰

By repeating the apocalyptic signifiers in a gestural loop of “fire and brimstone” within the show, the machines share with Barthes’s Warhol the (attempted) destruction of the represented, which, in both cases, translates into an attack, to use Benjamin’s term, on the “aura”: through repetition, the aura of the image or gesture begins to deteriorate. Furthermore, the obsolete technology of the SRL machines annihilates the temporal—which, in regards to the apocalypse, is synonymous with the teleological. It posits a scenario that has already crossed over the “real” end into the perpetual return. The result is an apocalypse that is simultaneously a post-apocalypse, in which the finality of the end is repeatedly evacuated; the dead rise and fall and rise again in a convulsive ataxia.

Barthes also argues that the pop art object (in his case, Warhol’s objects) is “no longer anything but the residue of a subtraction: everything left over from a tin can once we have mentally amputated all its possible themes, all its possible uses.”²¹ The pop artist thus produces an object which signifies nothing; or, rather, the signified has no history and no interiority—the

²⁰ Roland Barthes, “That Old Thing Art,” *The Responsibility of Forms*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), 200.

²¹ *Ibid*, 201.

object or image *is its own essence*. The machines produce their objects (their gestures, their “narrative”) through a negation that follows the pop artist’s, according to Barthes’s outline. The difference is that the SRL negation is performed by material objects (the machines)—*not by their creators*—thus the negation is free from the affect that encumbers the pop artist’s “asymbolic” object. (In other words, the artist’s performance as a machine, like Warhol’s, is unnecessary because the SRL performers *are* machines.) The process of negation parallels Baudrillard’s production of effects without cause: by abandoning meaning, the machines eliminate cause; by repeating the effects without cause, they strip violence—the show’s structuring effect—to its “essence.” What results is a liquidation of the ideological platform on which violence signifies and, moreover, on which performance itself rests as an other to the real.

“The show is about achieving complete freedom from the restraints of civilization. And one way to achieve complete freedom from the restraints of civilization is to burn civilization down. Then you’re free of it.”²² Mark Pauline’s statement is an ambitious assessment, yet it illustrates the paradox that emerges when the show is codified as metaphor and reinserted into an ideological framework. Ultimately, the SRL show achieves nothing outside of its hallucinatory realm (what Pauline has referred to as “the world we created for them”²³), but not because the performances are “fake.” It achieves nothing because achievement is denouement, forever fixed in the subject’s ideology. Pauline is right, though: the show is free from the restraints of civilization, at least the civilization that it conjures. Because its foundation is destruction, anything produced—from its spectacle to its subversion—is captured and brought down again. This may be the nihilist subject’s fantasy (in as much as he/she maintains fantasies), but only the

²² Mark Pauline, *Survival Research Laboratories: 10 Years of Robotic Mayhem*, DVD, directed by Jon Reiss (Oaks, PA: Music Video Distribution, 2004).

²³ *Ibid.*

object can perform it: at its core, reality is destroyed, along with the subjectivity from which reality arises. The question “for what?” finds its answer in the silence of exteriority; the machine extinguishes the last gasp of bewildered meaning as the subject dies on its knees pleading for life.

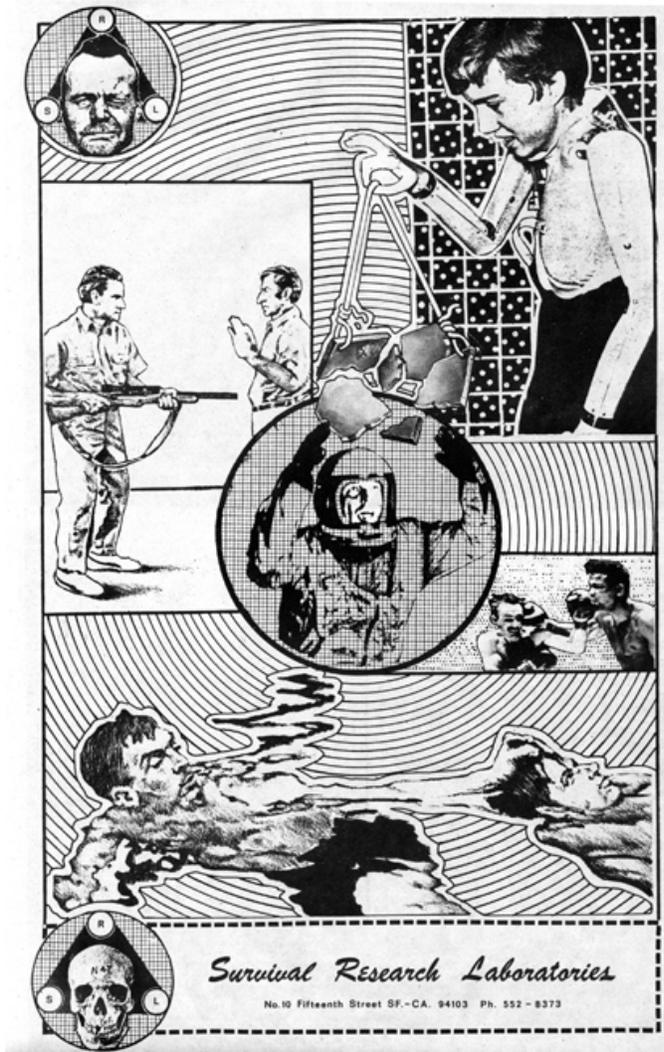


Figure 4.1. Survival Research Laboratories, advertisement, *Boulevards* magazine, 1978.



Figure 4.2. Survival Research Laboratories, *Extremely Cruel Practices: A Series of Events Designed to Instruct Those Interested in Policies That Correct or Punish*, Los Angeles, 1985, performance still.



Figure 4.3. Survival Research Laboratories, "Flame Whistle".



Figure 4.4 Survival Research Laboratories, *A Bitter Message of Hopeless Grief*, 1988, film still.



Figure 4.5. Survival Research Laboratories, "Inchworm".



Figure 4.6. Survival Research Laboratories, “Mummy Go Round”.



Figure 4.7. Survival Research Laboratories, "Rabot".



Figure 4.8. Survival Research Laboratories, *Extremely Cruel Practices: A Series of Events Designed to Instruct Those Interested in Policies That Correct or Punish,* performance still.



Figure 4.9. Survival Research Laboratories, *The Unexpected Destruction of Elaborately Engineered Artifacts*, Austin, Texas, 1997, performance still.

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

The Sand-Man ends with the protagonist Nathaniel's accidental death: following a psychotic seizure, he flings himself over the edge of a tower. As the slumped body draws a crowd, it produces a performance severed from the subjectivity through which it was named man. Nathaniel is thus exposed as what he had always been: an object, in a world of objects, acted upon by and acting upon those around him. In the character's death, and in his fumbling romance with an automaton, *The Sand-Man* lays bare the correlation between the performing object and phenomenology-in particular, Merleau-Ponty's chiasmus. Nathaniel is exposed as an object, just as he subjectifies Olympia by refusing her otherness.

What Merleau-Ponty achieves with his theory is the democratization between the subject and the object-not a poststructuralist equivalence of signs, but the undoing of the subject's hegemony. Consciousness allows us to define the object as subjectified, but the subject creates the world through objects, and is reified vis-à-vis those objects. I have proposed in this thesis that the object's capacity to perform has ramifications that surpass the democratization and de-center the subject. Where the object's materiality reflects our own materiality as bodies in space, its performance reflects the subject's agency, which is concomitant with his/her consciousness. By enacting agency, the object confronts the subject as an other that is no longer willed by subjectivity. No longer subordinate, no longer silent and, above all, no longer obedient, the object reverses the terms of subject-ness and object-ness without changing the names. In other words, the object's action does not transform it into a subject; it calls into question the ideological infrastructure of subjectivity.

In his *Critique of Judgment*, Kant describes the sublime as “a formless object, so far as in it or by occasion of it *boundlessness* is represented, and yet its totality is also present to thought.”¹ The sublime is thus knowable (“present to thought”) but beyond our comprehension. The individual object is incapable of realizing Kant’s ineffable sublime. Yet, by doing something it suggests a system outside of and closed to consciousness-boundless, in relation to the subject, and sublime. It displaces the subject as the object’s keeper and it annihilates the ego that claims to be its maker. In Cartesian terms, the ego thinks itself into existence. It thinks its world, it thinks its objects. By acknowledging the difference between the object’s reification via consciousness and its subordination to *a consciousness* the subject allows the object an agency, but within a Cartesian system. The performing object exteriorizes the difference. And, furthermore, it does so from its perspective: as an immortal, diabolical thing. Its systems *play* subordinate to ours, but never yield. Ultimately, the object that performs situates the subject as the other. And as we build up its armies, it reminds us that we are outnumbered.

¹ Immanuel Kant, “Critique of Judgment: Introduction,” *Art and Its Significance: An Anthology of Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Stephen David Ross (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), 121.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Natalie Haddad received her bachelor's degree in fine arts from the College for Creative Studies in Detroit, where she also worked as Arts Editor for a newspaper.