

Interview With Mike Kelley

Sérgio Bessa

Sérgio Bessa- When I heard last year that you were writing an essay on Öyvind Fahlström I got very curious. Then I was told that you had actually met him in the 1970s. There are many things your work has in common with his, especially with regard to logic systems. Do you feel that you've been influenced by his work?

Mike Kelley- I've always been a big fan of Fahlström. Even when I was in my twenties, I liked the complexity of his work. But at first my interest in systems came from my interest in literature. I was interested in the writings of Raymond Roussel, and the way that kind of systematic approach freed you from being too involved in the subject matter of the work and allowed you to develop artworks without having to get so involved in personal interests. I liked Roussel because of his word games. He could write a whole novel full of incredible detail, completely exotic and amazing, and yet it wasn't some kind of personal exploration. There was plenty of room within there to free-associate, but there was also plenty of room to use things that were quite alien to you.

SB- You wanted your work to have that kind of complexity?

MK- I wasn't so organized at that time, because I was trained as a formalist and I was working against that somewhat. I was interested in the "new novel," like the work of Burroughs and the "cut-up method." I also became interested in Beuys' work, which was all based in mythic systems, a kind of materialist approach to myth. I became interested in all those things. Then when I came to California, most of my teachers were conceptualists, and they were interested in more of a systems approach; but what I didn't like was that they also had a reductivist approach, and I really liked the maximalist approach of Fahlström and Beuys, people like that.

SB- A little more messy?

MK- Yes, and more worldly. I tempered the messiness of that earlier approach with the reductivism of conceptualism at that point, and tried to play with that a bit, but that didn't last very long. I started doing performances, and that's what led me into doing all these projects that are based to some degree in logic systems. But in the beginning, when I was younger, my work was based more in visual analogies, but through the influence of the conceptual artists it became a little more language-oriented.

SB- You mentioned earlier that you wanted to avoid getting involved in personal interests, but in works such as "Monkey Island," for instance, your point of departure was a childhood memory.

MK- Well, I never wanted to leave out the biographical; I just didn't want it to be predominant. I wanted to treat biographical things as equal to fiction, mixed with fictive elements or historical elements, and I didn't want to deny that because, for example, I've always been interested in surrealist art, and I liked that surrealist art had a program: it wasn't just about gushing, it was about taking all these memories and then trying to put that material back into a kind of sociological context. Which is something that I think was never taken very seriously with the transition of surrealism into America. The programmatic social aspect was left behind, and it all became really subjective; but I always thought the analytic aspect of surrealism was not so different from conceptualism.

SB- That's true. Fahlström also owes a lot to surrealism.

MK- Yes, specially in the early work. I was also, like him, really interested in abstraction at a certain point. For example, he was doing concrete poetry. At a certain period all my writings were abstract -- they were sound things and poems, like some of the work of Raoul Hausmann or Schwitters. I found that interesting, but then I got bored with it after a while, because it didn't have

any social resonance. And I really like Fahlström's use of, say, things taken from the newspaper -- facts, big historical things mixed with minor things.

SB- I have recently found a great deal of scatology in Fahlström's work that I didn't see at first.

MK- At the time when I first saw his work I never particularly focused on that aspect of it. I was more interested in how he was able to take diverse things and fit them into a system. But there are scatological elements, especially in his drawings of Richard Nixon. At the time I thought of that more in relation to the comedic politics of the New Left, especially the Yippies. There was a lot of that kind of political scatological humor, which is traditional low political humor -- this defaming kind of thing, like drawings of the president on the toilet.

SB- I was puzzled at first because he is so cerebral and methodical, but on the other hand there are times when these scatological impulses take over. And it is quite explicit in some of his writings.

MK- I think it comes in a way from his politics, the New Left and the politics of liberation. I think it's interesting to think about it in relation to the maps in which he's using shapes of actual countries and then he just starts making them up. This is a kind of fanciful having fun, playing with shapelessness. And he's contextualizing this shape, giving it meaning, and then he just goes back and makes another one. So meaning is really floating in his work, but meaning isn't denied, it's not nihilist, and that's what I really liked about the work.

SB- His work was never self-indulgent.

MK- I didn't really like a lot of expressionist work, or mystical works, where chaos is this unbounded thing, and you never contextualize it, you never bother to make it mean anything. It's always either outside of meaning or incapable of meaning, and I don't think that that's how you think, I don't

think that's how you approach the world. You always make things mean something -- you might abandon them, but you make things mean something for the moment because you need to do that. So artwork for me has always been the production of a provisional reality, and then you produce another one, and you produce another one, and you produce another one. But you have to take it seriously; otherwise it doesn't have any psychological or social function at all.

SB- Are you familiar with Fahlström's writings and poetry?

MK- Only the works that were translated into English. The manifesto in which he talks about "bisociation" was a very important piece of writing for me. I was taken with the idea, and I thought it was an interesting manner of working. I don't remember the writing particularly very much, but at the time it seemed to be about having two concepts and finding a resonance between them in order to produce a third concept. I was interested in that, especially since in my school I was being trained in a pretty starchy, formalist way. There was a tendency to think about art in a very primary way -- basic laws, singularity, things being finished and things being of themselves -- essentially based on Greenbergian ideas.

SB- This is exactly what makes it possible for me to associate your work to Fahlström's. "Plato's Cave," for example, has a kind of relentless energy in moving from one issue to the next, and back again, so that we, the readers, never find a safe area to rest. Did you have all these issues laid out before you from the outset, or there were things added as the work progressed?

MK- That particular work started with the issue of the possessive, but once it got rolling I just gave that whole thing up. I didn't even expand on it. And the work became more about developing the themes textually. But a lot of that development was quite formal as well, arising out of various researches into all these various themes. I would write on each subject, and then I would weave them together based on language association and image

association, things like that. It became more a process of developing a text. Now, certain of these issues would be discussed, or brought up, but they weren't often expanded upon. The work isn't either didactic or poetic. In all the performances, the way they function through time is that there's contradiction, and so a certain sort of thought is contradicted later on. In general you can say that the work, because of these three themes, is playing with, or maybe debunking these metaphysical myths. But that's not really the point of the work. The point is more a structural one.

SB- Perhaps one might be misled by the title, which gives the reader these three very loaded ideas to associate.

MK- The title already has the issue inherent in it. It already raises the issue of deconstruction of those myths. I wouldn't have to do anything more than that -- to make the title -- if that was the point of the work. The point of the work was the experience of it in real time -- the time-based work -- and that's why the final outcome is more a structural work. I don't know if you looked at the book, or if you were able to find a copy of the text, but you'll see it's more about flow, about dwelling on subject matter. It is mean-spiritedly committed, sometimes at the expense of the found texts, which I scramble and invert and do other things with. But again, it is more a matter of playing with it. And again, the work wasn't designed to be didactic, and it doesn't function didactically or hold up to philosophical scrutiny on that level. It's more play with language and ideas. But it is, in its subject matter, kind of heroic. And I played with that concept in relation to the presentation of myself as some kind of self-conscious rock star, playing with the heroic performer -- sort of a pseudo-Jim Morrison performance. But it didn't get to stay there -- it didn't maintain that pose; it kept falling apart.

SB- But there was a need to engage the viewer, and make him or her see it your way. The invitation to engage in "spelunking in the cave," as opposed to accepting the Platonic model.

MK- That is sort of a joke I make. If you were going into the cave with your back towards the light, you'd never get to reality -- you'd just go into another cave.

SB- But if you accept the joke the whole work becomes about misreading.

MK- My work pretty much has been the glorification of misreading, and not just one misreading but a lot of misreading. At least at that point it was.

SB- Is "Plato's Cave" typical of your process of working? Is that how you usually go about it?

MK- I am less programmatic than I used to be. At times, I pick the theme and work with it, and sometimes it stays there and turns into something else; but at a certain point I would decide that, "Well, here is the leitmotif," and I stuck with it. Generally I try to pick something that will allow some development, some kind of open-ended motif, or some kind of historic situation that I try to jam with.

SB- How exactly do you see it changing now?

MK- After the "Plato's Cave" piece, none of the pieces culminated in a performance anymore, like "Half a Man." There wasn't really any kind of end to the work. And at that point I started going back and doing things in older styles. I decided I wanted to play against notions of development and history. In the other work I was always substituting one logic system for another logic system, but they were all discrete. But now I'm more interested in my work not being discrete. I want to go back and make works from any of these series and just continue them.

SB- So you are not closing a body of work. You begin it and leave it open?

MK- Right, I just leave it open, endlessly morphing. And they morph from one into the other. In fact, I have maybe three or four projects now, but I

can't differentiate them, except maybe by major themes. They blend into each other.

SB- Have you shown any of these projects?

MK- Yes. I'd say the "Missing Time" project is one of those. I've been also doing some sci-fi related works, and a work about the "Land-O-Lakes" butter princess. All these works are separate projects, but there are thematic crossovers. I let them flow one into the other, and I don't care so much about having to tie up an end with them. Even the performances were pseudo endings, because they didn't make any sense, so they weren't coherent logic systems. Still, they had the effect on the audience of being a coherent logic system, because they were dramatic, and people felt moved by them. They had an impulse to believe, as you have in theater. In a certain way I was relying on people's impulses to project meaning and closure onto works. And that is especially easy to do in time-based works, because they can't remember what happened -- it's too confusing. So now I'm more interested in that projection, in playing with it more overtly, especially in the "Missing Time" projects. I'm interested in how people project personae onto me, and onto historic figures. I make works about that.

SB- Was "Missing Time" a critique of the art education system?

MK- I'd say it was more about a kind of Oedipus relationship, a pseudo Oedipus relationship to your master, whether that's your family, your teacher, or your culture -- the patriarchy -- and doing works that seem to be in line with the tenets of your training. So the school model was really the positioning of a place, but I was also interested in the composition of the model, which was composed as a formal painting. The model doesn't tell you anything particularly, but it does tell something about composition. The paintings were a kind of joke, sort of gestural formal paintings with the intrusion of pulpish elements, which gives everything a kind of dysfunctional edge, perhaps giving the whole thing the air of child abuse. Which is what I

was going for. And then I wrote all these abuse scenarios that were meant to look like newspaper clippings, which gave them the veneer of truth, to look like news. They looked like something real, cut out of a newspaper, but they were complete fabrications or fantasies.

SB- How do you think people received this show?

MK- I don't think they got it.

SB- I thought the show was very dry, and I knew people would react to that...

MK- You said that before, but I don't understand what that means, because I don't think it was visually any drier than my previous work, except maybe the stuffed-animal works, but people just like those because they allow them to emote.

SB- Maybe, but compared to the black-and-white drawings that you've done in the past, pieces such as the photos of children's paintings accompanied by texts, this work was hard to approach.

MK- The black-and-white drawings have a certain amount of visual oomph they're simple imagery, really. They're like posters, nicely designed, but in actuality I think from the "Half a Man" series onward I allowed the viewer more. Because the early drawings are quite reduced, in that I wouldn't allow myself to use any color, but on the other hand I felt, "Why is my world so restricted to this presentational mode?" and that's when I started using craft material. Now I'm more interested in using materials that have certain kinds of cultural qualities in themselves, the way an architectural model has a certain kind of pretty quality that is inherent to it, and in going back and doing paintings again and allowing myself to do something that I really wouldn't allow myself to do because I was embarrassed by it. So I've been in shows in Europe, for example, in recent years that were only paintings, and people go into those and may think that I returned to paintings, but people

have gotten really lazy in recent years, and they don't want to look at what the work is about, they just want to fetishize the painting qualities of things.

SB- I don't really believe that the black-and-white drawings were any less demanding than the new work you're doing now. They were never indulgent or showy, they were never about draftsmanship.

MK- At the time, though, because it was before the return of pop in the art world, the general criticism couldn't get past the fact that they looked like cartoons. They only saw them in terms of high and low issues, and it was really frustrating for me, and I just said forget about it. Now the art world has changed so much in the last six or seven years, and become so dominated by pop strategies, that these old drawings look really natural now; but at the time there was a kind of rigor I could see in them that other people couldn't see. At the time, people talked about them as if they were cut out of a comic book, and how they were about "aesthetics of the low."

SB- ...or adolescence.

MK- Yes, or adolescence or childhood or something like that, just kind of numskull, bad-boy issues, as if I were doing this work to be naughty. I even go back and do work like that on occasion, because I know what it looks like, but I'm more interested in these other problems. I'm more interested in the problem of making a painting that people will look at sincerely in terms of the handed-down qualities. I think almost all my work has that quality now, and it's overtly historical.

SB- It's almost a surrealist strategy in a sense, the fact that you're allowing yourself to work in a way that is taboo -- at least in regard to what most people expect your work to be.

MK- Abstract-surrealism was an attempt to break with bourgeois picturing techniques, but Magritte and Dali were interested in utilizing those

techniques. In my work the social pact of imaging is foregrounded, there's less focus on individual psyche and more on social psyche.

SB- I have always been very curious about a group of work that made reference to Wilhelm Reich, I don't think you gave a title to it, but you had an orgone shed, an enema table etc. How do you think that body of work was received?

MK- Well, it was pretty much ignored. But then most of my work has been pretty much ignored since the stuffed animals.

SB- It was a very strong show, and I was expecting a good reaction to it, but it was frustrating to see that no one seemed to care.

MK- I hate to say this, but I think a lot of my work is reactive to what people say about the previous work. And that work was really a reaction against the discussions surrounding the craft works. There was a lot of discussion about them in relation to feminism and gender politics. It wasn't exactly what my interest was. Because that was a PC period, I thought that people got caught up with the assumption that everything that's sewn is about women, when I gave plenty of clues that my work wasn't about that. I didn't see why people kept clinging to this idea. And really their doing this was just about politics, it was about trying to use my work as a springboard to talk about how women artists have been unfairly treated in art history. I don't mind that, but that's not what I was doing. So I thought, I'll just do some work that is really male. And then I thought, I'll just use different male archetypes.

SB- It was a very macho show.

MK- Yes, it was a very macho show. But then it was about playing with different kinds of psychology, so it wasn't a unified macho image, except in terms of material. It was like going into a rental wood shop and having a bunch of different men make a bunch of stuff with the same tools. That was the way I was thinking about it: "Here's the guy who's into orgone therapy,

and here's the guy who's into..." -- you know, a lot of it was about self help, but it had a kind of psychological/body pathology overtone to it. That's what gave it continuity, and the materials also gave it continuity, but there wasn't any kind of unifying theme. Even formally there wasn't much connecting the pieces, besides the fact that there was a kind of general furniture orientation. But never was any of that discussed in any review of that work. I thought it was screamingly obvious, and I wrote about it and told people what it was about. This latest body of work, "Missing Time," has almost only been shown in Europe, which is funny because the whole repressed-memory syndrome phenomenon isn't so prevalent there, and they have a really different relationship to art and all of this material; they will never understand it. And then the people here just essentially refuse to look at it.

SB- Perhaps it was too painful for some people to go through it, because it came around a time when a lot of stories about abuse were coming out, like the little girl in Long Island who was abducted by her uncle and kept in a dungeon that he had built, stories like that. And then your show was talking about people empowering themselves through craft, through these very homey things.

MK- Yes. That show is what got me interested in architecture -- exactly what you're saying, that you can have this kind of craft, or produce these kinds of spaces that have a really highly charged negative overtone, and they have the veneer of homeyness, but then they are very frightening. That's when I decided to build schools; I said "Well, let's expand this to a larger scale," to an institutional scale, instead of something like a cubbyhole -- you can have a giant cubbyhole that has the same horrific tone. And that's what I tried to do with this educational complex. I'm going to do new buildings where I actually build full-scale rooms -- it's like building one room as an educational complex. There will be mixtures of various styles, and still have cult overtones, or torture rooms, or sex rooms, or something like that. But they're going to look more like stage sets. They won't look like rooms. They'll look like paintings, like three-dimensional paintings.

SB- What is your work for Documenta about?

MK- "The Poetics" is an overtly historical piece. Tony Oursler and I were in a band together in the late 1970s and early 1980s, "The Poetics," so I suggested to him that we pick up that work and develop it into a new body of work. The first thing we did was remix all these old tapes; we're going to make a CD box set, a reissue. And then we did all this video stuff, real straight documentary footage of interviews and landscape, the environment and things like that. But then we're also doing things that are scripted, and things that look like reality television. So, it's kind of a play with how you picture history, and in a really particular way rock history. Basically, what we're doing is going back and remaking works that we were going to make then, but never did. What we were thinking about was this kind of trope of conceptual art that was about when it was designed in your mind -- this whole thing about backdating, and the controversy surrounding several artists who have made works that people claim that they backdated, and all that stuff.

SB- Didn't Yoko Ono did something like that a few years ago?

MK- Yes, and I think Robert Morris has done this; he's built things from his notebooks, and they were dated the year in which they were designed. This has always been a major tenet of that kind of conceptualism. So we're doing that, but it doesn't look anything like that, you know, it's just very weird. A lot of the work was designed to be seen almost in a nightclub kind of environment, really garish. And then we're doing a fanzine and a CD box set. And there'll be a room with video projections and sculptures and all this stuff. So it will be part art show, part historical kiosk.

SB- Are you going back to performance with this work?

MK- No, I'm just doing music again. I haven't been performing, I've just been making music. When I was young, I took music very seriously as a kind of analogue of my visual production, but when I started performing I gave

music up. I saw the theater, and these performances, as a kind of sculptural music. I thought it was more serious, more analytical, or more deconstructive or something, so if I played music then it was purely for relaxation, and I didn't think about it as art. Recently I've felt compelled to make music again, but because of the way I've looked at it, I've had a hard time justifying it to myself as art. So this was a way for me to approach it -- as a problem of historical constructions -- to think of the pieces as visual tropes of history or something like that. That would allow me to start doing the music as a kind of theater, without worrying about the quality of the music. It's analogous to my return to painting; I don't have to care whether the paintings or the music themselves are good in any traditional sense.

SB- In a sense it is going back to performance, just not a public performance.

MK- Not with me as actor. The problem became that I couldn't be on the stage anymore, but I don't have any problem with doing this work with media, or playing music, where the focus isn't on me personally.

SB- I always wondered whether performance was a means to help you build a work.

MK- The way I came to it was that the whole body of work was the performance. Then people called the part at the end the performance, but I thought the whole thing was the performance, and then the part on the stage was just the end of the performance. There was the social cliché of what a performance is, but I thought of the whole thing as performance. I thought of my work as operating very much within a Beuysian tradition, and that it was about the whole thing. You can compartmentalize certain things off, not so much for any real reason, but that's the convention of presentation. People can't take in the whole thing. They can only take a chunk at a time. So really, it's more about using the social code, or visual language, so that people understand what you're doing.

SB- When you mention Beuys, do you also identify with the "shamanistic" element of his work, or the whole idea of "healing?"

MK- No, no, I mean no. I've always been against primitivism in art. I just don't like the word "Shamanism" because it always hooks into the New Age, or into neo-primitivism. The word is so colored by these implications that I refuse to use it. Within that kind of dialogue people use other words -- like "the trickster," or "the warrior," and all these terms that people bandy about, but it all goes back to clichés of tribalism. I just won't use that kind of language. I only use language of the industrial environment. The problem with the metaphysics of Beuys is that it allows people to see his work as based on timeless principles, and not to see it as a constructed myth. I dislike that about Beuys' work, even though I feel that his work is so much more, because if you look at its logic, it is very funny. And the more you look at it, the more humor you see in it. It's sort of absurdist. People miss that, people don't talk about that. I don't like the connection of artist to priest.