

Press Kit: Occultism – Heavy Metal – Superman. Mike Kelley in Düsseldorf

Mike Kelley

Ghost and Spirit

K21, March 23 – September 8, 2024

Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf

Press conference and preview

Thursday, March 21, 2024, 10 am, K21

With:

- Susanne Gaensheimer, Director Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf
- Falk Wolf, Curator

K21

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#MikeKelley

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Occultism – Heavy Metal – Superman. Mike Kelley in Düsseldorf

The work of Mike Kelley (b. Detroit, Michigan 1954; c. 2012 in Los Angeles, California) is experimental, opulent, and disturbing—and is considered one of the most influential since the late 1970s. The Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen is presenting a comprehensive retrospective at K21, which was developed in collaboration with the Tate Modern in London, the Pinault Collection in Paris, and the Moderna Museet in Stockholm.

Whether spiritualist ideas, heavy metal, or Superman comics, Kelley draws on images and myths from pop and subculture to pose perennial questions about the place of humans in the world and society. Kelley addresses the influence of politics and educational systems, as well as class and gender affiliation. In the 1990s, for example, Mike Kelley attracted attention with sculptures made of stuffed toy animals and handicrafts associated with female domestic crafts. Behind their supposed harmlessness, however, something sinister, threatening, and twisted emerged. One of his last major bodies of work, *Day Is Done* (2005), draws on carnival, Halloween, and school theater productions. In such popular customs, Kelley sees ritualized violations of social conventions. Art itself can also be counted among the places where such rule-breaking can take place. In its midst, Kelley stages the artist as a highly fragile figure.

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The title of the exhibition *Ghost and Spirit* is also to be understood in this context. In an early draft of an unrealized performance entitled *Under a Sheet/Existence Problems (sic)*, Mike Kelley points out a distinction: A ghost is someone who has disappeared, but a spirit is a memory that remains, an energy that has lingering influence. A little more than ten years after his untimely death in 2012, this distinction of the still young Mike Kelley forms the bracket around the retrospective at K21. Is the artist a vanished person, or do we sense his lingering influence in his works? What energies does Mike Kelley, whose work has had a lasting influence on three generations of artists, leave behind? Making art means creating things that were not there before, transforming ideas into material objects, giving concepts a body. A creative, magical act that is not coincidentally reminiscent of the emission of ectoplasm, the mysterious secretion that appears to pour out of the orifices of mediums when they come into contact with spirits in spiritualistic sessions. With the multi-part photo-text work *The Poltergeist* (1978), Mike Kelley condensed questions of embodiment, memory, and forgetting in ectoplasm. They form the common thread that connects the fascinatingly diverse work of Mike Kelley through more than one thousand square meters of exhibition space. It leads from the early performances from the late 1970s and early 1980s, whose handwritten scripts are being shown publicly for the first time, and the partially reconstructed work complex *Monkey Island* (1982–1985) to the large-scale project *Half a Man* (1987–1991), which dominated the 1980s and also includes Kelley's works with stuffed toy animals.

Mostly crocheted, sewn, or knitted by hand, these stuffed animals marked Kelley's international breakthrough. He found them at flea markets and garage sales. They were used and appeared damaged, mended, dirty, and tattered. Kelley's arrangements, his titles such as *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid* and *The Wages of Sin* (1987), and his later use of audio tapes with spoken texts in the *Dialogues* series, undermined the first impression of the cute, cuddly children's toy and alluded to the ambivalences of manual labor, commodity form, and gift. They evoked thoughts about gender issues and power structures within the family. But they were also perceived as sinister and, to the artist's great surprise, many viewers associated them with sexual abuse.

In the mid-1990s, Kelley responded to this public reaction by beginning to explore conspiracy theories, the power of the imagination, and particularly the role of memory. Works from this phase include *Timeless/Authorless* (1995), which refers to American pop culture and psychoanalysis, in particular the repressed memory syndrome popular at the time, the assumption that memory gaps are due to traumatization caused by abuse. Kelley began to read his own (Catholic) upbringing and his artistic training as institutional abuse and showed how all forms of memory, history, and ideas about the future are dependent on belief systems, which he repeatedly questioned through his work.

His last two major bodies of work consistently continue along these paths. In the series *Kandors* (1999–2011), Kelley traces the prototypical American pop myth of Superman and explores the psychological depths of this figure. In the apse of K21, we as viewers symbolically enter the Fortress of Solitude, the secret retreat of the Man of Steel, and experience in a droning environment how memory, trauma, and forgetting and the search for identity and history drift apart. *Day Is Done* (2005) emerged from a study of documents of popular extra-curricular activities in high school yearbooks: theater, music, and band performances, secular relics of religious rituals and customs, and carnivalesque activities of all kinds. In the largest room of the exhibition, Kelley takes us into a turbulent, colorful, and loud world between horror film and musical, between fragment and gesamtkunstwerk. *Day Is Done*—the exuberant celebration is followed by excess, the light and the dark sides of desire, and the sinister side of the night, which often lurks right in the depths of our own psyche.

The exhibition was organized by the Tate Modern, London, in collaboration with K21, Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf, the Bourse de Commerce, Paris, and the Moderna Museet, Stockholm.

Curated by Catherine Wood, Director of Programs, and Fiontán Moran, Curator, International Art, Tate Modern. The presentation at K21 is curated by Falk Wolf.

The exhibition is supported by the ART MENTOR FOUNDATION LUCERNE, the Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts, and Hauser & Wirth.

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Mike Kelley. Ghost and Spirit

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Mike Kelley. Ghost and Spirit

K21, Mar 23 – Sep 8, 2024

Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf

K21

Press conference and preview: March 21, 2024, 10 am at K21

Opening: March 22, 2024, 7 pm at K21

Speakers:

- Susanne Gaensheimer, Director Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf
- Falk Wolf, Curator

From 9 pm: DJ Set with Vivi Wahnsinn

From 10 pm: K21 Rave with DJ Wolfram (DFA Records/Public Possession/Live from Earth)

Free admission

Sneak Peek – Preview for Young Adults

Friday, March 22, 2024, 4 – 5.30 pm

Free admission with student ID card

Registration required, in German

Supporting Program (Selection)**Guided Tours**

Sundays and public holidays / 3 – 4 pm

Fee: 3 €, registration required

as well as during the KPMG Art Evenings / April 3, May 1, June 5, July 3, August 7

Free admission, registration on site

Themed Tours

Tuesdays / 4.30 – 5.30 pm

Fee: 3 €, registration required

“The Making of...”: The Exhibition Mike Kelley**Guided tour with Falk Wolf, Curator**

Wednesday / April 3, 6 pm., participation free of charge as part of the KPMG Art Evening,
registration on site

Gallery Talk in English

Wednesdays / 1.5., 5. 6. / 7 – 8 pm

Free admission as part of the KPMG Art Evening, registration on site

K21**Guided Tour of the Exhibition in Plain Language (D)**

Sunday / May 26 / 3 – 4 pm

In cooperation with Lebenshilfe Düsseldorf e. V.

Exhibition Tour for the Deaf

Sunday / June 9 / 11.30 am – 1 pm

Registration with the City Association of the Deaf Düsseldorf:

r.witgens@gl-duesseldorf.de

Guided tours for children (age 5 and older)

First visit the exhibition, then get creative yourself!

Sundays / 3 – 4 pm

Admission free, registration required

Exhibition Preview**Forthcoming. Speculations in Urban Space
April 13 – August 4, 2024****Press Conference: April 11, 2024, 11 am at K21**

Loss, memory, destruction, and reconstruction are the starting points of the exhibition, which presents various responses by contemporary artists to the upheavals in urban space. The international selection of works from the last ten years includes videos, photographs, film installations, and books. It takes us to Beirut and Dhaka, Los Angeles, Naples, and Berlin. It is about the city as a site of questions about the future, with which new possibilities for communal living are constantly being negotiated. The imminent – the forthcoming – becomes a moment of speculation about decay, renewal, and traces of the past in what is just emerging.

The title of the exhibition, *Forthcoming*, is borrowed from the book of the same name by the Lebanese writer and filmmaker Jalal Toufic. It deals with the non-linear effects of disasters on culture. The forthcoming becomes a moment of speculation on decay and renewal, on the traces of the past in what is now only just emerging.

The exhibitions on the Bel Etage are supported by the Foundation for Art, Culture and Social Projects of Sparda-Bank West.

**Visions of Tomorrow. Histories of Abstraction
from July 6, 2024****Press Conference: July 4, 2024, 11 am at K20**

In response to the challenges and crises of the twentieth century, artists embarked on a journey to question the world and explore new horizons. Pioneering painters like Etel Adnan, Paul Klee, Henri Matisse, Alice Neel, and Andy Warhol created groundbreaking, visionary artworks. While art provided havens and spaces for reflection, it also functioned as both a mirror and an engine for social change. The K20 Collection's newly redesigned presentation weaves together the diverse histories of abstraction with contemporary issues. By exploring connections, intersections, and ruptures spanning across yesterday, today, and tomorrow, it unfolds in a loosely chronological order and intertwines thematic galleries with islands of encounters. With this reenvisioned collection presentation, the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen showcases its iconic paintings and introduces new acquisitions, dedicating itself to the polyphonic and dynamic histories history of abstract twentieth-century abstract art.

Lars Eidingen. O Man
August 31, 2024 – January 26, 2025

Press Conference: August 29, 2024, 11 am at K21

The artist Lars Eidingen (b. 1976 in Berlin) captures the majority of his photographs with his smartphone. His approach testifies to his strong connection to the time in which we live. Eidingen's photographs portray conditions and situations that are often inconspicuous and go unnoticed in everyday life. By placing them at the center of the image, Eidingen invites the viewer to explore themes such as urban life, nature tamed by man, and the vulnerable body, as well as poverty, despair, madness, and loneliness. The exhibition, conceived in close collaboration with Eidingen, presents a selection of new photographic and video works.

The exhibitions on the Bel Etage are sponsored by the Foundation for Art, Culture, and Social Projects of Sparda-Bank West.

Media partner of the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen:
Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung

Supported by the Ministry of Culture and Science of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia

Annex

Wall texts

Performance

Mike Kelley began his studies at the California Institute of the Arts in 1976. "CalArts" was one of the most progressive art schools of its time. Most of the professors were associated with minimal and conceptual art. Kelley distinguished himself from these art movements with his early performances, which used specially constructed props, instruments, and sculptures. Carefully prepared scripts determined the order of events. The recited text played a key role.

"I became interested in the fact that the manner in which I spoke about the objects changed their meaning. This led to longer performances in which it was no longer possible for the viewer to recall the development of ideas, so they were forced to be in constant present. What- ever the logic was at that moment was where they were, because the flow of the logic was too complicated or ambiguous to follow. If there were meaning inversions, they were not recognizable. That's why I did not allow my performances to be documented—so nobody could go back and make 'sense' or 'non-sense' out of them." (Mike Kelley in conversation with Eva Meyer-Hermann, 2012)

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With "The Banana Man," Kelley took a completely different approach. From the beginning, this performance was conceived for video. Many artists who were experimenting with video at the time performed in front of the camera without editing. Kelley, on the other hand, uses editing, a central design element of Hollywood films. But he breaks the rules: He creates jumps and breaks up the chronological sequence of the narrative. This approach foreshadows Kelley's major project "Day Is Done" (2005) with its musical-like, seemingly unconnected episodes.

Monkey Island

"Monkey Island" was a project consisting of art objects and writings that culminated in a 1983 performance of the same name. It began with a blank sheet of paper. Kelley folded it twice diagonally and opened it again. This created an X. On each of the four sides of this X, Kelley drew and noted pairs of opposites: for example, life/death, ears/feet, water/land, nose/bladder, above and below the waistline. The drawing continued to grow until it resembled an insect or an hourglass. In another drawing, the X shape became a landscape.

"Monkey Island is an epic poem... a sailor's tale. It's a physiognomic landscape travelogue that seems to dwell mostly in the sexual region." (Mike Kelley 1982) Accordingly, the published text for the performance begins with the sentence: **"It's rutting season here."**

Kelley created a diagram that looked like an alternative formula for explaining the world. But because this formula was contradictory and never conclusive, it continued to proliferate and was translated into ever new drawings, paintings, photographs, and sculptures—including the X-shaped floor installation that has been reconstructed for this exhibition. Mike Kelley later experimented with unconscious and conscious associations related to the “X” diagram in *Monkey Island Part II*, 1985, a live hypnosis session. With “*Monkey Island*,” Kelley challenged the explanatory claims of science, especially structuralist ideas in art, anthropology, and biology. In other words, the idea that reality consists of eternal structures that can be deciphered in language and images. In a monologue that was almost impossible for the audience to decipher, he reduced it to absurdity.

The Poltergeist

In this seven-part photo-text work, Kelley stages himself as a spiritualist medium. Ectoplasm seems to ooze from his ears and nostrils. Ectoplasm is a mysterious bodily fluid that is said to ooze from the pores and orifices of receptive people who come into contact with spirits. It thus represents a physical reaction to the spiritual. In nineteenth-century spirit photography, photographers attempted to depict ectoplasm using fabric, cotton wool, or smoke.

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“Occult rituals interest me because they are akin to art-making,” (Mike Kelley in conversation 2011) says Mike Kelly. To ‘make art’ is to create things that were not there before, to transform ideas into material objects, to give concepts a body—a creative, almost magical act reminiscent of the emission of ectoplasm: It is an interaction of the mental and the physical. Kelley links poltergeist apparitions to the state of uncertainty felt by adolescents. One of the panels reads: **“Poltergeist is a force and not a being like a ghost. But sometimes it has been seen to take bodily form. Small monkey-like Phantom. Like a child. The spirit of adolescence. A destructive force. This figure looks like a hot rod weirdo. Every feature erect with sexual energy. That’s why they have such an attraction for adolescents. Consequently, that’s why the poltergeist is attracted to adolescents.”** (Text from “*The Poltergeist*”, 1979)

Mike Kelley combines ideas of contact with spirits and motifs from the world of adolescent experience with his reflections on the relationship between inspiration and artistic production: “An adolescent is a dysfunctional adult, and art is a dysfunctional reality, as far as I am concerned.” (Mike Kelley interviewed in 1991) In both cases there seems to be an interaction between body and mind. Something materializes. It becomes visible and tangible, but it is outside the rational logic of the world. Art can also assert itself beyond this logic, beyond sense and nonsense, beyond means and ends. Ghostly apparitions (and later also encounters with aliens) and the theme of adolescence remain leitmotifs in Kelley’s work. They can be seen in his later works with stuffed toy animals and crocheted blankets, as well as in his works on memory and forgetting.

Half A Man

Mike Kelley made his international breakthrough in the late 1980s with installations made from stuffed toy animals, dolls and blankets. He found the mostly homemade objects at flea markets and garage sales. Used, sometimes worn and dirty, sometimes mended, they bear the traces of countless different children's lives. Often knitted, crocheted, or sewn by hand, they undermine the commodity character of mass-produced goods. With the work "More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid," Kelley also refers to the power relations that are created between adults and children through these homemade gifts. The sheer mass of evidence of parents' love for their children, which had lost their function, had an uncanny effect on many viewers.

"I was really surprised that when everybody looked at these works I made, they all thought it was about child abuse. Now that wasn't anything I expected. And not only did they think it was about child abuse, they thought it was about my abuse. So I said, 'Well, that's really interesting. I have to go with that. I have to make all my work about my abuse—and not only that, but about everybody's abuse. Like, that this is our shared culture.' This is the presumption, that all motivation is based on some kind of repressed trauma." (Mike Kelley in "Art in the Twenty-First Century" 2005)

Kelley did not reject the audience's interpretations and assumptions, nor did he insist on his own biographical truth. He fully embraced the fictional level and took it literally. In doing so, he also made his own biography the subject of speculation: What had really happened, and what had been invented? What could you really remember, and what did you think you remembered because you knew it from old photographs stories told by adults, or from film and television? In the years that followed, he continued to explore the psychology of remembering and forgetting.

Day Is Done

"Day Is Done" is the overarching title for Mike Kelley's "Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstructions #2 – #32, a group of sculptural video installations, photographs and a feature length video. The end of the day. The title is both a promise and a threat. What happens after the sun goes down? The tranquility of the evening is joined by the exuberant celebration of excess, the light and dark sides of desire, and the eeriness of the night that often lurks alone in the depths of our own psyches.

The source material for this cycle of works are photographs that Kelley found in high school yearbooks: of theatrical performances, musical and band performances, secular relics of religious rituals and customs, and carnivalesque activities of all kinds. Kelley reconstructed coarse-grained, halftone, black-and-white printed documents with actors, and recreated or designed stage sets and props. With their help, he shot fictional video scenes. He wrote the screenplay and lyrics, composed the music with a collaborator, developed dance interludes with a choreographer, and directed the production.

“The folk entertainments I represent are true in the sense that most people have done or experienced such things themselves during their lifetime. I don’t see them as simply shallow any more than I see ‘false memories’ as shallow. They are truly felt experiences. Movies and pop songs are similarly real on the emotional level. I’m playing with the equivalence of art and true recollection. I want to create a contemporary gesamtkunstwerk that is not utopian in nature but is an extension of our current victim culture.” (Mike Kelley in conversation with John C. Welchman, 2005)

The sculptural installations in the exhibition space include partial or complete stage sets, props and videos. The path from day to night leads into a turbulent, colorful, and loud world between horror movie and musical, between fragment and total work of art. Of the planned 365 Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstruction videos—one for each day of the year—Mike Kelley had completed thirty-six by the time of his death.

Education Complex

The work “Educational Complex” is Mike Kelley’s response to the public’s reaction to his works with stuffed toy animals, dolls and crocheted blankets. Given the enigmatic arrangements, many viewers spontaneously thought of child abuse. Some even suspected a biographical background. Kelley reinterpreted these interpretations as a future working principle: He defined his (Catholic) upbringing and his artistic training as institutional abuse of his person.

For “Educational Complex,” Mike Kelley created a large architectural model made up of models built of his childhood home and all the educational institutions he attended with areas he could not remember left blank. Kelley thus alluded to “Repressed Memory Syndrome.” This psychological phenomenon was already highly controversial among experts at the time. According to the theory, places that people can no longer remember are considered to be places where a traumatic event took place. The gaps in Kelley’s models thus appeared to be places of possible abuse experiences.

As research into the unreliability of memory emerged, the theory fell into disrepute, especially when it came to the legal processing of alleged abuse cases. For example, interviewees were often unable to distinguish between invented and actual memories.

“If current research reveals memory as unstable and prone to fictionalization, detractors argue, how can testimony based on the recollection of events have any weight either in police investigations or in court? As an artist, this is where I become interested in the debate. For at this point, the whole drama of the law and the system of justice merges with the territory of aesthetics. The implication is that life at its most ‘real,’ where it intersects with the agencies of power, with that which controls you, also lies in the domain of art, of that which is created or fictional.” (Mike Kelley, “Missing Time: Works on Paper” 1974-1976 Reconsidered, 1995)

Mike Kelley continued to pursue this interest in the relationship between perception and memory in his work. The individual episodes of "Day Is Done" (2005), the "Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstructions," can thus be understood as stories about events that take place in the gaps of the "Educational Complex."

Kandors

In the series titled "Kandors" (1999–2011), Kelley traces an American pop myth: Superman. The first stories in the comic book series appeared in the 1930s. Superman is an alien. The only survivor of his species, he was sent to Earth as a baby shortly before the destruction of his home planet, Krypton. On Earth, he has superhuman powers, which he uses for the good of mankind. Not until 1958 does a story appear in which Superman learns that Kandor, the capital city of the planet Krypton, has survived the catastrophe in a greatly shrunken form, along with its tiny inhabitants. From then on, he keeps the city under a glass bell in his secret retreat, the Fortress of Solitude.

"One of the things that interested me the most about Kandor [...] is that there is no continuity in its depiction in Superman comics. The design of the city was never standardized, and the artists who illustrated the stories over the years depicted it in myriad ways. I was fascinated by the fact that there were many different versions of the same city. It was impossible to reconstruct Kandor; various partial and contradictory city views would have to be randomly patched, [...] a perfect reflection of the ambiguous nature of the city and an appropriate model of memory's elusive nature."
 (Mike Kelley, Kandors, 2007)

Kelley takes the pop myth seriously and builds on it. His numerous three-dimensional models of Kandor contradict each other. Kandor 6 and Kandor 17 include versions of the city under a glass bottle or bell jar on pedestals or sculptural plinths along with other elements such as resin panels, metal tanks, rubber hoses and a video projection showing what the various artificial atmospheres in the bottle might look like. Mike Kelley continued to work on the Kandor project until his death. "Kandor 16B" is one of the later works in the series. The colorful clumps of resin under the bell jar show the impossibility of depicting the bottled city.

"A ghost is someone who disappears An empty concept
 A spirit is a memory (think: the spirit of something, it's
 not there but it is)

Is what remains
 It has a lingering influence I AM A GHOST
 I HAVE DISAPPEARED

...

I've disappeared but survive in others Others are reflections
 [stage direction: hand mirror]
 There for the purpose of proving my existance [sic]."

(Mike Kelley: "Under a Sheet, Existance [sic] Problems" [un- dated / undatiert])

"I was fourteen in 1968, conscious enough to feel a part of the general social turmoil, too young to be a real hippie, but just old enough to be eligible for the Vietnam draft. However, my worldview was very much a by-product of the countercultural movement. As a result, I had nothing in common with my older siblings. They were 'post-war'; I was part of the TV generation. I was mediated... I was 'Pop.' I didn't feel connected in any way to my family, to my country, or to reality for that matter: the world seemed to me a media facade, and all history a fiction— a pack of lies. I was experiencing, I think, what has come to be known as the postmodern condition, a form of alienation quite different from postwar existentialism because it lacks any historical sense—there is no notion of a truth that has been lost. It is characterized by the feeling that there is a general evenness of meaning. To borrow a phrase from Richard Hell, I was part of the 'blank generation.'"

(Mike Kelley, "Cross-Gender/Cross-Genre", 1999)