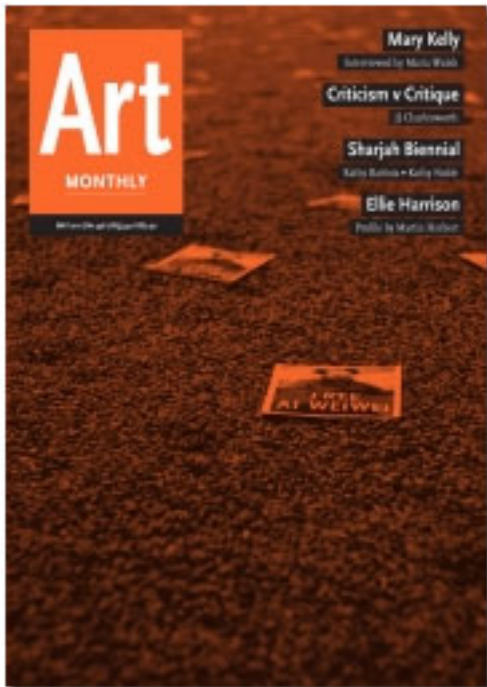


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INTERVIEW

Corpus

Mary Kelly interviewed by Maria Walsh

Maria Walsh: You have said that in your 2010 work, *Habitus*, you go back to your own primal scene, the Second World War. In some ways your work is a primal scene for me. I came to it late, at the end of the 1980s to be precise, and have always been backtracking through it. The only work I saw in my chronological lifetime was *Gloria Patri* of 1993, but *Corpus*, made between 1984 and 1985, has been a really informative work for me. I wanted to start by asking about feminism and delayed time and narrative. Apart from the fact that within each work there are different narratives, it is almost as if the show itself, which is a retrospective, is plotting a narrative.

Mary Kelly: I called the exhibition 'Projects' because the idea of a project-based practice is very important to understanding how the work comes about in relation to a discursive field as an ongoing process of questioning. In terms of medium, I have been

interested in extending the definition of 'technical support', as Rosalind Krauss puts it, to include different discursive sites—the Women's Movement, for example—and then seeing psychoanalysis as a set of procedures generated by it. So the exhibition captures the narrative, as you say, of my engagement in that discursive site, and the urgency of the inquiry that leads me from one work to the next. My first questions were about femininity, maternal femininity in *Post-Partum Document*, made between 1973 and 1979, and then in the work you were talking about, *Corpus*, I asked what falls outside of the reproductive paradigm, questions of object-choice, ageing ... It seemed logical after this to ask about masculinity, and *Gloria Patri* came out of that. Then, it was a question of what was behind the shield, about the victims of war, which lead to the *Mea Culpa* series in 1999, and *The Ballad of Kastriot Rexhepi* in 2001.

I didn't do any work that was explicitly about feminism until 'Love Songs' in 2005-07. That was the first time I looked back to see where my practice came from and, really, to say that the idea of interrogation, or *les enquetes*, originated in the events of 1968. Most of the women I collaborated with on restaging the archival images were born around that time. Maybe your age group is in a no-woman's-land in relation to that, but I don't think of generations as literally chronological. For those born from the early 1960s right up to the early 1980s, it started to occur to me that they get drawn into the orbit of 1968 as an object of fascination much in the way that Freud talks about the primal scene—the sexual scenario that informs the child's question: where do I come from? Well, I wanted to consider how the family saga is linked to the grand narrative of social change. I mean, how the child deciphers parental desire as the political primal scene.

For women who have this fascination with that time, even though we were children then, it is as if we have no memory of that time. I felt quite traumatised by the exhibition, in the sense that Hal Foster talks about trauma in Freud, that we can't understand things in the present ...



Mary Kelly *Love Song: WLM Demo Remix 2005*

Deferred action.

Yes, I was alive then, but I wasn't 'there'. It is not until much later that the event becomes real but then you can't experience it. Moving to a different question but remaining within the framework of the exhibition, the idea of cinematic time, the sequential nature of it and how that might operate in gallery space has always been important in your work. The newer works *Multi-Story House*, of 2007 and *Habitus* seemed to have more of a sense of simultaneous time and space. Even though you can go into *House*, and we follow the narratives around the work, it is very different. It is so much object-based. I was interested in your decision to make this shift.

Both of those works are collaborations with Ray Barrie, who is a sculptor. Film culture has been key for my work, and I worked in film collectives on *The Nightcleaners* in 1975, and other works, though I didn't take that route. I wanted to see how durational elements could be explored in an exhibition context. When Peter Wollen saw *Postpartum Document* in the 1970s, he said 'that's diegetic space' and now I have realised, after the fact, that this was, more precisely, what I was interested in. I have spoken many times about how I was influenced by the long take in Straub and Huillet's film *Othon*. But in my work, I present narrative prose that unfolds in time, creating a sense of something accumulating over time in the gallery space. At the extreme end of the sequential or real time experience there is *Post-Partum Document*, with its warts and all diary style, and then *The Ballad of Kastriot Rexhepi*, which involves the viewer moving through the work using the idea of a 360[degrees] pan. The *Ballad* is about 200 linear feet, which is the length of an old film reel. And it took time to produce. The lint casting process for this work took over six months and 10,000 pounds in weight of washing to finish. I think simultaneity becomes a focus with *Gloria Patri*. I became

interested in what was happening on the periphery of the viewer's vision, what enters the space where you're reading from the places you cannot see. In that work the trophies are slightly out of your range of vision while reading the text on the shields, but you're aware of them inflecting that experience. But even with 'Interim', when it was shown at the New Museum in 1990, I had Historia in the middle of the installation, so there was something happening across the space between these objects and the wall works, not just in a formal sense but also as a kind of historical dialogue. Perhaps this marks a move towards a different kind of space, not simply 'narrativised', as I used to say, but dialogic. And this is what predominates in the three-dimensional work.

While the text in Habitus is reflected in the mirror below in a kind of loop, I noticed that there are also other reflected layers of the text occurring, giving the work another dimension.

It changes with the light in the gallery. Unlike Multi-Story House, which is illuminated from the inside by fluorescent lighting under the glass floor, drawing you into the work and into a process of identification, Habitus doesn't give you that kind of access. Memories are reflected, distorted perhaps. It is based on the Anderson shelter of the Second World War, and could be considered in some sense an extension of domestic space, but it doesn't have the intimacy of House and the structure itself is less like an assisted ready-made.

I wanted to ask you about monuments and trauma. We are constantly subjected to the portrayal of war trauma stories by the media. We do not have time to process them or remember them. But then, memorials sometimes cover over the site of trauma, monumentalising it in a way. In The Ballad, what is really interesting is your use of an everyday waste material—lint—in which, while it is transformed into something aesthetic, something beautiful, you can still see bits of hair and flecks of dirt. I'm interested in the link between this everyday waste material and this traumatic story.

I wouldn't want to make monuments.

We need them to remember but the question is what kind of memorial?

It was so difficult to think about how to make a work dealing with the victims of war-related atrocities. I had been working on this for a few years, getting nowhere, and then I had my epiphany. There is always washing to be done and, well, I was doing the washing when I heard a woman giving witness at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on the TV. I didn't see the image, only heard her voice, and I thought that the ephemeral quality of the lint in the filter screen of the dryer captured, in an almost unconscious way, the affect of that moment, and I wondered if I could make a reliable casting process so that units could be combined to form a continuous narrative relief. That resulted in a series of works in 1999, 'Mea Culpa', based on incidents in South Africa, as well as Lebanon, Buenos Aires, Sarajevo and Cambodia, that had been reported to the War Crimes Tribunal. In The Ballad of Kastriot Rexhepi I use this process for a larger installation and then, of course, there's the Michael Nyman score, so it is a memorial but not a permanent one.

Why did you have the music commissioned?

Earlier he had asked me to write something for him, but I didn't want to get involved in musical theatre. But when I started the lint works, there was something inherently rhythmic about the organisation of units and the panels—they could be arranged in groups of two or three or four, like time signatures in musical notation. And then, with The Ballad, Kastriot's story is written as a parody of the national allegories that abound in traditional ballads and I wanted to present it in a more performative way, so it just seemed right to have it sung. Michael's film scores, for Peter Greenaway especially, are often very emotive and parodic at the same time, so I felt it would be perfect to have him write an original score for the exhibition. I also liked having the musicians perform in the middle of the space, so that people could walk around, listening to them and reading the 'libretto' at the same time.

Could you say something about the importance of psychoanalysis in your work? Psychoanalytic theory was a dominant discourse in art in the 1980s and 90s. It was like a tool for questioning subjectivity, sexuality, identity etc. Interest in it seemed to wane after that, although I think there is a renewed interest in it currently. Does it still inform your work?

Psychoanalysis has a long connection with art throughout the trajectory of Modernism–Surrealism obviously, but it is not always the Freudian unconscious that we find there. For me, Freudian psychoanalysis, and Lacan's reading of it, in particular, is more relevant. Its linguistic emphasis allows you to deal with the psychic structure of difference in ways that address sexuality in relation to other issues such as race and class. Language is the interface between the social and the psychic; as Maud Mannoni says, 'The specifically human environment is neither biological, nor social, but linguistic.' That was my mantra for Post-Partum Document. In more recent work, I have been trying to combine the Lacanian account of the unconscious as 'the effects of the speech of the Other on the subject' with the Benjaminian idea that 'there is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one', that is, something missing in the past that bears on the present and the future. I see this collective project emerging from the symptomatic exchanges of childhood, so 'working through' that archive, in Freud's sense, is very important to me. I would say that those are the two theoretical poles around which my ideas revolve.

Funnily enough, it was my encounter with your work that led me to do an MA in psychoanalytic theory.

Where?

With Parveen Adams at Brunel.



Mary Kelly: Flashing Nipple Remix, #1 . 2005

How wonderful! We were both in reading groups in the 1970s. Parveen was in the family group, I was in the history group, then we were both in the Lacan reading group. Initially, psychoanalysis was very attractive to us as a discourse that could address sexual politics via a Marxist notion of ideology. There was so little translated at that time. Well, Ben Brewster had just translated *The Mirror Stage*, so we had that. But, mainly, it was the reference to Lacan in Althusser. In the movement, we were convinced that this new discourse of psychoanalysis could make sexuality pass into the grand narrative of social change, though when I first started talking about Lacan in relation to my work, it was like a freak show. During the exhibition at the ICA in 1976, Parveen Adams, Laura Mulvey, Sue Lipschitz and myself led—or tried to lead—a seminar defending our use of Lacan against accusations that it was just male-dominated theory. Parveen always says that she started writing about art because of my work.

In the *Corpus* section of *Interim* you said that you were daring the female spectator to ask the question: am I a man or a woman? The hysteric's question and, of course, the discourse of hysteria features so much in that work, creating a kind of hyperbolic femininity. Do you still think of it in that way?

Well, what I was trying to do in that work was create a space for the woman, or the spectator in the position of the woman, to send herself up, like the joke, a space where she could laugh at herself and gain a certain distance from that hyperbolic femininity you noted. As psychoanalysts say, the obsessional neurotic's question is: am I dead or alive? And the hysteric's question: am I a man or a woman? So, miming the hysteric in *Corpus* seemed to be a way of releasing the woman from that moment of narcissistic identification that pertains to sexual difference. That is still relevant, though in another way for me now, because I think that being a woman is only a brief period in one's life.

How do you mean?

The structure of femininity, its heteronormative aspect, doesn't last very long.

That question—am I a man or a woman?—reminds me of the child's questions about the differences between men and women in *Post-Partum Document*. I have always understood that your use of the first and third person is between fiction and documentary, that you put conversations into fiction and that the use of the 'I' is a kind of collective sign. But reading the text in *Documentation V* in this exhibition, I must say that I felt the child's questions were, dare I say, 'true'.

Fantastic. I want them to be 'real'—not realism—but in Lacan's sense of the Real, the object-voice. Do you hear that in the voices in *Multi-Story House* too?

I hear them, but not in the same way, as I am very much aware of the form of the work, of looking through and walking around it. The voices are more simultaneous—a polyphony perhaps—as opposed to that sense of something unfolding sequentially in *Post-Partum*. But I guess that is my spectatorial positioning at this moment in time.

When I talk about the voice, I have the Lacanian *objet petit a* in mind, that aspect of the real that is always already lost. The effect of these voices, not simply what is said, is there in my memory and I try to evoke it through the specific materiality of the work. In *Documentation V*, the units are so tiny, aren't they?

Yes, I had to peer in at them and then stand back with the jolt of this 'real'.

Scale is part of that experience, certainly.

I'd like to quote you back to yourself. This relates to what we were talking about at the beginning about feminism and time. In 1995, as a response to the 'Bad Girls' exhibitions, you coined the fantastic phrase about what you thought women artists were doing: 'A woman mimics a man who masquerades as a woman to prove his virility' and that this, in zine-speak, was 'A girl thing being a boy thing being a girl thing in

order to be a bad thing'; a great way of putting it that relates, I think, to the final panel in Gloria Patri. There seems to me to have been a shift from this aggressive posturing, and I was wondering what you thought of the current resurgence of interest in feminism in art.

Yes, it does relate to the final shield in Gloria Patri, where I was thinking about the fascination of masculine display for the woman and asking, how do you take up that position? You try to pass, you wear it on your sleeve and, with the 'Bad Girls', you do it better. Since that work, I moved away from that concept of masquerade, and looked more at questions of power and the way it is encoded, which is less visible. It was really people in the LGBTQ movement who went on to do something interesting with the legacy of anti-essentialist feminism. As one of the narratives in Multi-Story House says: 'In the queer/ trans movement, we're trying to sort out stuff that was started then ... to continue the legacy of activist feminism, but still be flexible.' I see a return to feminism here, and my thinking about generations stemmed from being surrounded by these women who seemed to have a connection to that moment of the Women's Liberation Movement.

Your students?

Yes, mostly. If you think of this in terms of what I have called the political primal scene then they are really asking about their parents' desire, trying to decode it. And I thought their questions implied a kind of failure: 'Why didn't you finish the job?' In the war series, if you want to call them that, I was considering the event, primarily, in Freud's terms, as traumatic. But with 'Love Songs' I began to think of my experience in the Women's Movement more as an epistemological event, closer to Alain Badiou's notion of 'event' as the instigation of a truth procedure. Something unexpected happens and it changes your life, right? You have to decide what it is about the event that you are going to be faithful to, what was missed in the past that bears on the present and the future. Perhaps that is what it means to have a 'project'.

Mary Kelly: 'Projects, 1973-2010' is at the Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester 19 February to 12 June.

Mary Kelly interviewed by Maria Walsh
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