

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

PERFORMANCE

MIKE KELLEY

AN INTERVIEW BY CARLY BERWICK

THE NOISES MIKE KELLEY LIKES to make with his main band, Destroy All Monsters, can veer from ethereal to nerve-jangling in seconds, almost like aural, time-based versions of his recent hangar-sized installations. (Kelley also plays solo, and with other artists such as Paul McCarthy and Dave Muller.) His 2005 exhibition at Gagosian's Chelsea gallery, "Day Is Done," was a well-planned assault on the senses, with brightly illuminated stage sets, dissonant sounds and images of manic church sing-alongs and campy high school theater.

It was music that led Kelley to art, he says—specifically, music that takes its cues from ideas, rather than a beat you can dance to. He claims music and art are different endeavors for him but nevertheless mixes the two without fear of self-contradiction. Since first hearing local acts such as Sun Ra and Iggy and the Stooges more than 40 years ago, Kelley has produced a wildly heterogeneous body of work that encompasses spoken-word performance, drawing, painting, writing, sculpture, multimedia installation and video. This month in New York alone, Kelley is presenting four multimedia extravaganzas, a coincidence that would feel like piling on if sensory overload weren't inherent to Kelley's work. There are new paintings at Gagosian, a collaborative six-channel video and sculpture with Michael Smith at the SculptureCenter [see review this issue], a live performance work at Performa 09, and, also as part of Performa, a music festival organized by Kelley.

His recent hybrid shows culminate a growing inclination to mix up genres, in works ranging from early language-based performance pieces to installations of drawings and, most famously, stuffed-animal sculptures to, eventually, the "Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstruction" series, in which he takes high school yearbook or news photographs from the '60s and '70s and re-imagines and elaborates their context, adding darkly comic dialogue and music. Kelley is consistent principally in his determination to rethink what's acceptable. As he says of the music he makes and likes, "It's what's hard to take." This, of course, is an apt description of his own visual work, which has become so influential that it now risks looking familiar—the

legacy of its rowdy, funny-morbid, middle-American vernacular has shown up, for example, in adolescent-loser-angst video installations by Sue De Beer and Ryan Trecartin and in the controlled-chaos rooms of Jason Rhoades and Justin Lowe. As Kelley notes in reference to noise music, frequent and compelling use of a fresh idea over time often leads to its absorption by popular culture.

As is clear from the acts he chose for the Performa festival, Kelley's noise music timeline starts with minimalist experimental composers and improvisers of the '50s and '60s, such as John Cage, George Brecht and Tony Conrad, as well as artists, many of them women, who use unaccompanied vocalization, among them Shelley Hirsch (who will be performing with Christian Marclay) and Joan La Barbara. Kelley's festival, organized with Performa 09 curator Mark Beasley, also acknowledges genre-mixing improvisers such as Arto Lindsay and environmental sound artist Max Neuhaus. It ends with industrial music from the '70s by the likes of John Duncan and Rhys Chatham. Performa curators will take the timeline of noise back even further and remake several "intonarumori"—wheezing, gasping, vibrating wooden sound machines invented by Futurist Luigi Russolo [see *InSight*, this issue].

Born in 1954 near Detroit, Kelley moved in 1976 to Los Angeles, a city whose art scene he has since helped to define. He received an MFA from California Institute of the Arts in 1978 and still lives in L.A. He spoke with me by telephone from his studio there.

Destroy All Monsters performing at All Tomorrow's Parties, Royce Hall, UCLA, 2002, curated by Sonic Youth. Foreground, Mike Kelley and, background (left to right), Dave Muller, Cary Loren and Jim Shaw.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW

Mike Kelley has a November solo exhibition at Gagosian Gallery in Chelsea, a collaborative project with Michael Smith at the SculptureCenter in Long Island City [through Nov. 30] and, at Performa 09, a live performance [Nov. 17-20 at Judson Memorial Church]. Also as part of Performa, he has organized a music festival [Nov. 20-21, at the Gramercy Theater]. All are in New York.



**"I ALWAYS THOUGHT OF THE BAND AS BEING A KIND OF SCULPTURE—
A SCULPTURE OF A ROCK BAND."**

CARLY BERWICK How are you defining noise music, in the context of the festival?

MIKE KELLEY Music that doesn't employ traditional structuring methodologies, that embraces cacophony and loud volume, and that is not necessarily traditionally scored—I want works from both the music and art realms. I also want to present works that existed before what is now generically called noise music—before "noise" became completely subsumed into popular music and there was still some kind of tie to the original notion of an avant-garde or experimental music.

CB Who are some of the people we're talking about?

MK Primarily, people coming out of the Cageian tradition or early electronic music, improvisational music, Fluxus—and then, following that, early noise practitioners like those associated with the No Wave scene in New York or the LAFMS [Los Angeles Free Music Society] on the West Coast.

CB Are you cutting it off at the 1970s?

MK That's the idea. My logic is that after psychedelia these kinds of musical approaches become incorporated into general rock music, electronica, industrial music and other popular forms.

CB Have you ever curated a music festival?

MK No. But since the Performa curators know I have a background in improv noise groups like Destroy All Monsters they thought I might be a good choice to provide a roster of artists for a noise music festival designed to connect with this year's festival theme, the 100th anniversary of Italian Futurism.

I simply gave them a list of musical works that inspired me, personally—it's a very subjective selection that includes a wide variety of approaches. I'm sure a lot of music purists will say the festival is a big mess—pairing improvisational music with compositional music like Stockhausen, for example. But I wanted to present various trends in the history of experimental music that allow for dissonance and where abstraction is entertained.

In actuality, I don't believe there is any such thing as noise music. The term only has meaning in relation to a given dominant system, like the 12-tone system. Since avant-garde practices

have become so completely subsumed into contemporary pop music such sounds can hardly be considered noise. This crossover happens quite quickly, especially when electronically amplified instruments become commonly available—like when electric guitars and organs began to be used in rock-and-roll music in the '50s.

CB What's interesting about amplification?

MK I'm not saying that everything that is labeled "noise music" is about loudness or amplification per se, but I do think that, conventionally, noise music is thought of as loud and raucous. I like loud and raucous music. I grew up in the era of hard rock music that utilized heavy distortion and volume. I personally like the sound of electronic feedback. I have no musical training. I don't know anything about traditional notions of music, except what I've read in passing.

CB So how did you encounter Stockhausen, Cage, all this atonal stuff?

MK Initially through psychedelic rock. In researching its roots, I discovered that much of what I responded to in it came directly out of avant-garde music. This led me to electronic music and free

jazz. I grew up near Detroit and saw a lot of free jazz, particularly Sun Ra. In fact, one of the reasons I was drawn to going into art was my understanding of this relationship between avant-garde music and art practice.

CB Was there an evident link between this music and art practice, in what you were seeing and listening to?

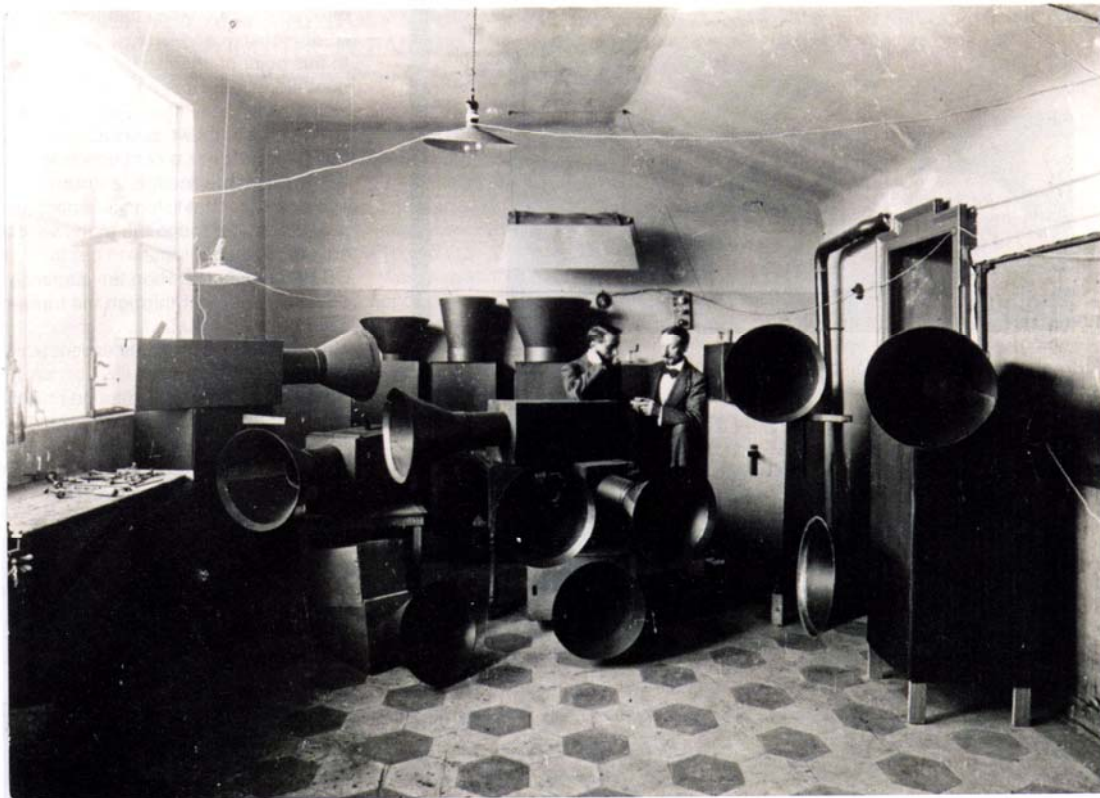
MK Yes. A lot of the music was sense-surround—there'd be light shows or films playing during the concerts, and much of the staging was theatrical. It was obviously linked to Happenings and avant-garde theater practice. I read about Dada and Futurist performance and found out that these notions of performativity originated at the beginning of the century.

CB Does the history of noise really all begin with Dada and Futurism?

MK Primarily, yes. Because that's when, at least in serious music, there is a shifting away from the notion that music is limited to a specified group of notes and chord structures to an acceptance of the idea that music is the organization of sound—any sound. I was very influenced by the essay "The Art of Noises"



The band Airway is included in the festival Kelley organized for Performa 09. Above, they perform at "LAFMS Telethon Revisted" at Otis Art Institute, L.A., February 2009. Photo Ben Brucato.



Luigi Russolo and his assistant Ugo Piatti with the *intonarumori*. Photo courtesy Performa/Rovereto, Museo di Arte Moderna e Contemporanea di Trento e Rovereto, Archivio del '900, Fondo Russolo.

by Luigi Russolo [published in 1913]—I read that when I was a teenager. That piece of writing really changed my life.

I grew up in a milieu where the test of musical quality was the ability to play the fastest guitar solo. Never having had any access to musical training, I wondered how I could produce music. I was talentless. But, thinking about it through Russolo and Futurism or through Fluxus, which were art-related, not music-related, genres, I was free to make music based on ideas rather than the mastery of an instrument. I could work with sounds I was personally attracted to, like feedback and static, which had the intensity of amplification of arena rock—the kind of sound that grabs you by your guts, that is so intense you cannot deny it.

CB I'm interested in your comment about not having training and being talentless. Does noise eliminate the criterion of talent?

MK It just shifts the notion of talent away from technical skill. But, again, noise music is a very unspecific term.

There are many composers who make what might be called noise music, like Stockhausen. And there are free improvisers who come out of the jazz tradition who are amazing technicians, but that virtuosity might be downplayed in favor of other intents.

I am not often that interested in controlling the sounds I make—it is more like play, done for the pure pleasure of experimentation. When I was in my late teens I would use old tape recorders and play loops of found and recorded sounds. I was at the University of Michigan then, studying art, and aware that such things were being done in the music and art context—Steve Reich's work for example. I became more aware of the ideas behind such works and the various modes of conceptual art. I was trying to find a niche for myself. But, at that time, I did not think I could find a place for my musical interests in my art practice. I saw it more akin to physical exercise, a free zone, where I could do what I wanted and it didn't matter whether it was any good or not.

But, oddly enough, I did certain things so early that they were novel in the art context. *Destroy All Monsters* is such an early example of an art school noise band that there are not too many precedents for it. We were pre-punk, and in the early '70s there were no public venues where we could play. By default, we were an artwork because there was no place for us in the music world. I always thought of the band as being a kind of sculpture—a sculpture of a rock band. The music was less important than the band structure. This was not so unusual really, because there were already popular fake bands like the Monkees that couldn't play at all and just acted their parts. The idea of doing something similar in the art context was interesting, but we also wanted it to be "art," which means it had to be unpalatable. We wanted



Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstruction #32 (Horse Dance of the False Virgin), 2004-05, chromogenic print and black-and-white Piezo print on rag paper, 45 by 40 inches overall. Courtesy Mike Kelley and Gagosian Gallery.

to sound heavy like a metal band. A certain kind of ugliness is a common aspect of the Detroit rock sound—like the Stooges, for example.

CB You were saying your music is outside your art, but then of course so many of your projects involve noise in one way or another.

MK After I moved from Michigan to Los Angeles I didn't have a steady group of people to play music with anymore, so that's when I began to do solo performance. These were language-driven but, to me, very musical in orientation—very composed, with much attention to the rhythm of the speech. These performances, unlike the noise improvisation of Destroy All Monsters, were highly structured but quite abstract. I thought of them as a kind of theatrical form of music, using

speech instead of electronic sounds. I didn't need other performers or special equipment to do them.

Still, ever since then, I have on occasion gotten together with other people to play improvisational music. I am involved in a number of different groups. We never rehearse, we rarely plan ahead. Because my other artworks are so thought out, I find this approach a kind of release.

CB Where do you hear the avant-garde in popular music now?

MK So much popular music is cacophonous, but it is not trying to be avant-garde. To give a very simple example: how many post-punk bands use the "off" guitar tunings of Sonic Youth? This might not even be conscious imitation; it's just what guitars are supposed to sound like in a certain type of rock and roll. Or, how many bands employ the dissonant qualities of certain Velvet Underground songs? I doubt they understand the connection between the Velvet Underground and the art music of their period—the

direct connection they had to Minimalist composers and Fluxus. Once it gets to this point of unconscious musical quotation, then I see no reason to include it in the festival. Even though some popular music sounds, on the surface, like it has a connection to this avant-garde lineage, it doesn't. The audience that listens to it doesn't think about it through the framework of art—or care about that.

CB What changes when the audience does think about it through the framework of art?

MK It's a more conscious experience, that's all.

When I was young and found myself attracted to music that didn't sound like standard music, I thought about that attraction through deconstructive modalities—through politics. It was important to me that the music was assaultive—even if that was not the intention of the composer and it was my misreading. I felt that the structures of popular music were a kind of pre-given information, a kind of, for want of a better word, brainwashing. These structures had to be attacked. I was very influenced by the writings of William Burroughs and his use of the cut-up technique. For him, this was a way of taking the world apart to expose how it was structured. People going to a music concert to dance and have a good time are not thinking about that. That's not why they enjoy music.

On the other hand, I don't want to be a snob. There needs to be music geared toward the level of sophistication of various listeners. For instance, I am not a particularly big fan of Marilyn Manson. For someone of my generation he seems like a rehash of Alice Cooper, and it could be said that Alice Cooper was a rehash of Screamin' Jay Hawkins. But it's important that 12-year-olds have their own version of packaged rebellion to shake them out of their little neighborhood rut. If all it takes is makeup on the face and some anti-Christian lyrics to shake things up a bit—I'm all for it. That's step one.

CB What about the pleasure principle? You were saying you really like cacophony.

MK It's sublime, it's like a thunderstorm or an earthquake. If you go to a concert by an amazingly loud metal band, it's a gut-wrenching experience; there's no denying the pleasurable aspect of that. At least, I find it pleasurable; I know many people find it to be the opposite.

"A CONCERT BY AN AMAZINGLY LOUD METAL BAND [IS] A GUT-WRENCHING EXPERIENCE; THERE'S NO DENYING THE PLEASURABLE ASPECT OF THAT."

CB How are noise and performance art intertwined? You said you see your music and performance as two separate things.

MK Yes, I do. On the other hand, the internalized notions I had about musical structure obviously inflected my performance work of the '80s. This is more consciously dealt with in some of my more current work. The performance I will present at the Judson Church as part of the Performa festival is based on popular forms of music and theater. It's part of my "Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstruction" series. I take images from found photographs of various American folk rituals and entertainments, and I try

to re-create them from scratch. One section of the Judson Church piece is a horse dance, with people dressed in horse costumes, like something you might see at a football halftime show. They dance to live organ music that was derived from my huge collection of popular organ records. I sampled these and cut them together to produce something akin to circus music. This was scored and two organists will perform it live. The music I have been making in the last five or six years is unlike the kind of improvisational music I normally make, because it needs to have a kind of illustrative function. Many different musical genres are referenced. I have, for example, just made a new album of dance music with the performance artist Michael Smith. It is a kind of techno music for babies.

CB Now that noise is part of general

musical culture, is it the end of noise as a category?

MK Noise is a relative term. I'm sure there is music being produced now that has to do with theories of noise that I am unfamiliar with—say, related to current technologies. But when you say noise music, I think you mean a historical term used to describe a certain kind of caustic post-rock. I think that is close to over as a trend because it is so omnipresent and so much a part of current popular music. The very fact that I have been invited to curate a noise music festival tells me that it is over. That's why I chose to present historical material. ○

CARLY BERWICK is a writer based in Jersey City.

View of the exhibition "Day Is Done," 2005, at Gagosian Gallery. Photo Fredrik Nilsen. © Mike Kelley. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery.

