

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

ARTFORUM

Mike Kelley and Michael Smith

SCULPTURECENTER, NEW YORK
Alan Licht

OVER THE PAST FEW DECADES, dancing, dressing up, and infantilism have been consistent components of the video and performance works of both Mike Kelley and Michael Smith, artists who frequently team with like-minded conspirators (Kelley with Paul McCarthy, Raymond Pettibon, and Tony Oursler; Smith with Joshua White, Seth Price, and Doug Skinner) but who never collaborated with each other until now. For their video/sculpture/sound installation titled *A Voyage of Growth and Discovery* (curated and produced by Emi Fontana of West of Rome Public Art, Los Angeles; curated at SculptureCenter by Mary Ceruti), the longtime conferees selected a ready-made situation that incorporated all three of their common touchstones: Burning Man, the notorious weeklong “radical self-expression” festival held annually in Nevada’s Black Rock Desert that is part outsider-art fair, part rave, part Outward Bound camping trip, part theme park, and part New Age bacchanal (not to mention a temporary city, with a population of fifty thousand). Smith revived his seminal character Baby Ikki, donning a bonnet, a diaper, and green-tinted, white-framed sunglasses, and set out for Burning Man in August 2008. Kelley did not attend, but the scattered six-screen configuration (each screen showing approximately

thirty minutes of footage from one of the six days Smith spent at the festival, though the same footage often appears on several screens at once) and sculptures both outside and inside the SculptureCenter building are distinctly his.

Though the narrative was intentionally fractured by the simultaneous projections, it wasn’t hard to ascertain the basic chain of events. On day one, Ikki hits the highway in a mobile home, passing the time by toying with the stove burners and a Bic lighter, splashing in the Jacuzzi, and watching films—the germane cult classics *The Wicker Man* and *The Baby* (both 1973)—on a TV monitor. When he finally arrives at the festival, it’s already in full swing. Wandering around clutching a stuffed frog (presumably a proxy for Kelley, as well as a lovey), a pacifier never leaving his mouth, Ikki points at nearly everything he sees, from the sun to the “art cars” (decorated automobiles often made to look like animals) to a parade of bunny suits to enigmatic figures in goggles and white robes carrying lanterns through a dust storm. He plays tetherball, dances at a drum circle, rides a slide, and goes on a picnic by himself. As night falls, the festival becomes a phantasmagoria of black lights, laser shows, flaming batons, and dancing hordes; Ikki becomes ensnared in a pole dance with three female vampires. The climax arrives with Burning Man’s traditional spectacle in which the Man, the giant effigy at the center of the festival, is set alight amid a fireworks display. The last we see of Ikki, on the screen designated as day six, he’s toddling out of a tent into the night.

A sense of psychedelic-style disorientation was palpable on entry. Besides the sextuple video Ikki to contend with, there’s Kelley’s sound track, a layered, high-volume semicacophony (a compositional tactic familiar from Kelley’s multimedia installations *Day Is Done*, 2005, and *The Poetics Project*, 1997, a collaboration with Oursler). The sound track syncretizes thumping techno beats, classical piano, tamboura drones, crashing noises, and even the Nice’s 1967 pounding protoprogrammer “Flower

King of Flies.” A variety of jungle gyms and skeletal metal structures, modeled on those at the festival site glimpsed in the videos, flanked the screens, most adorned with Kelley’s trademark thrift-store craft dolls and stuffed animals. A geodesic dome loomed over scores of the hand-me-downs lying supine on the floor, conjuring both the chill-out room of a rave and a campout under the stars. Towering in the far corner was a thirty-foot Ikki sculpture made out of junkyard metal parts, its right forefinger pointing to the sky/ceiling. It’s as much a tribute to Ikki’s deadpan iconic presence as a spoof of the wooden Man.

Burning Man is a bit of a junkyard itself, with its homegrown art (none of which is for sale, and much of which is burned at the end of the week) and recyclings of yesteryear’s fads (Hula-hoops, roller disco). The festival’s principle of a gift economy (the only concessions sold are ice and coffee) is one surely not lost on Kelley, who has

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made a point of emphasizing the initial gifting of the crafted objects he often uses to the thrift stores in which he finds them. He has also shown an interest in regression, not only in his displays of children’s playthings and blankets but also in his 1992 essay about *The Baby* and the cartoon character Baby Huey titled “Filmic Regression” (there is a glancing reference to it in *Voyage*, when Ikki takes a nap and dreams of women’s breasts; in the essay, Kelley cites Melanie Klein’s idea of the mother’s breast as a primary object “from the beginning of life,” as well as selections of psychoanalytic film theory that relate the breast to the film screen). The carnivalesque atmosphere



This and opposite page: Mike Kelley and Michael Smith, *A Voyage of Growth and Discovery*, 2009, six-channel color video, Volkswagen, plush animals, chair, metal, found objects. From left: production still; photo: Malcolm Stewart. Installation view, SculptureCenter, New York; photo: Jason Mandella. Production still; photo: Malcolm Stewart. Installation view, SculptureCenter, New York; photo: Jason Mandella. Installation view, SculptureCenter, New York; photo: Jason Mandella.

of *Day Is Done*—multiple video and photographic restagings of “socially accepted rituals of deviance,” from Halloween to school plays to workplace dress-up days, adding up to a virtual marathon of regression—evinces, in retrospect, a kinship with Burning Man’s sprawling milieu. At the festival, the return to playtime, despite being more self-consciously artistic, is also more drastically infantile and deliberately outlandish and must be confined, as a result, to a remote location rather than permitted to lurk beneath the surface in Middle America. Still, *Voyage* is something of a cinema-vérité sequel to *Day Is Done*, with the benefit of a specific locale and a main protagonist (Ikki) to pull Kelley’s fascination with conditionally approved juvenilia into sharper focus.

Voyage also gives Ikki his richest mise-en-scène to date. In the 1978 video *Baby Ikki*, Smith ventures out into Chicago traffic, only to be dragged back to the sidewalk by a clearly unamused cop. Ikki becomes, predictably enough, the center of attention; the bodily risk is in step with the performance-art trends of the time. In *Playground*, a 2002 collaboration with Price, a lonesome Ikki explores deserted meeting spots (a church, an office); at Burning Man, he takes on a sizable, densely populated environment and finds acceptance. One more oddball in a teeming mass of self-styled freaks, he garners relatively little notice—but still engages in far more social interactions than in his previous appearances (with the exception of the *Birthday Party* performance, 2008, which was obviously staged in his honor). *Voyage* expands Ikki’s proclivities to include dancing to feel more a part of the crowd and channel surfing—activities that, for the first time, connect him to Smith’s longstanding alter ego Mike. A paradoxical everyman/perennial outsider whose worldview is largely shaped by television, Mike makes attempt after attempt to belong, whether entering a disco-dance contest (*The USA Free Style Disco Championships*, 1979/2003) or hosting a party that no one shows up for and dancing along with

Donny and Marie Osmond on his TV (*Down in the Rec Room*; 1979/1981). Mike, like Ikki trailing behind revelers in *Voyage*, is forever chasing after good times that lie just out of reach. Though the Burning Man demimonde is probably beyond Mike’s scope, one can’t help but feel he would glory in the social involvement required of festivalgoers.

In addition to Kelley’s and Smith’s previous work and concerns, the spirit of Joseph Beuys, while not specifically invoked by either the festival or *Voyage*, seemed to hover over both. Burning Man, with its policy of “radical inclusion” and admonition of “no spectators,” could be posited as Beuys’s theory of social sculpture made manifest, a minisociety as a work of art to which each member contributes and, indeed, is expected to participate in rather than observe. In Beuys’s installation *The Pack*, 1969, twenty-four sleds, each carrying a “survival kit” of felt, fat, and a torch, appear to trail out of a Volkswagen bus (felt and fat were supposedly used by the Tartars to nurse Beuys back to health after a plane crash during World War II); similarly, Burning Man participants are responsible for bringing their own supplies and sharing them with one another, as befits a weeklong stay in the outback. *Voyage*, too, had a Volkswagen bus, stationed in SculptureCenter’s courtyard (although its flat tires suggested a poke at hippie culture and its emblematic vehicle). A single plush lion dangling from the top rung of a jungle gym recalled the hare resting atop a chalkboard in Beuys’s *Eurasia Siberian Symphony* 1963, 1966 (and, curiously enough, in *The Wicker Man* a dead hare—a prop memorably used by Beuys in his famous 1965 action *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*—is found in the grave of the girl whose disappearance is being investigated).

While Burning Man has long denied drawing any specific inspiration from *The Wicker Man*, *Voyage* could easily be read as a twenty-first-century American update of that film, with Ikki’s road trip to Black Rock in lieu of Sergeant Howie’s solo flight to a remote Scottish island just before

May Day. Even the dissonance at the film’s end—Howie stubbornly singing Psalm 23 (“The lord is my shepherd”) while the townsfolk gaily chant “Sumer Is Icumen In” as he burns alive—seems to reverberate in Kelley’s mix (which includes “Maypole Song” from *The Wicker Man*’s sound track). Howie, though, is sacrificed to the pagan “old gods” to bring the island new crops, a fate that Ikki is obviously spared, as Burning Man’s immolation is a non-denominational, hedonistic end in itself—after all, nothing can grow in the desert anyway (this brings us back to the dead hare, as Beuys noted that hares are ancient symbols of fertility). Burning Man’s concluding ritual sacrifice/bonfire is made in the name of sensation rather than renewal; for all its emphasis on community, ultimately the festival is social sculpture as spring break.

Besides furthering, quite significantly, its creators’ own odysseys in art that is sourced in pop culture and group phenomena, *Voyage* also critiques the art world and even the artmaking process. Here, Burning Man pulls double duty as a stand-in for art biennials, and Ikki’s prelingual gesturing makes for a metaphoric caricature of the flutter of curators, collectors, gallerists, and critics at Documenta, Miami Basel, or Venice, trying to take it all in. The pointing could also indicate the mind of an artist collecting images to replicate; and the installation itself, to a certain extent, recasts the artistic impulse as tourism: going to Burning Man and coming back with a video installation and a new set of sculptures. As glimpsed in *Voyage*, Burning Man’s ephemeral, quixotic approach to artmaking and exhibition may seem, to some, to put the commercial art world to shame; to others, the festival may appear self-indulgent or tacky. But in contrast to the Sisyphean impermanence of Burning Man’s yearly blaze, the durability of Kelley’s Ikki monument, more than its reformulation of the Man as a baby, is *Voyage*’s truest response to the festival. □

Travels to West of Rome Public Art, Los Angeles, spring 2010.

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