

CLUSTERFUCK AESTHETICS

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The Palace at 4 a.m. at P.S.1, 22-25 Jackson Avenue Long Island City, Through February 6

Mike Kelley: "Day Is Done" at Gagosian Gallery, Through December 17

A manic-depressive panic attack in the face of profound information overload

Whether you call it the New Cacophony or the Old Cacophony, Agglomerationism, Disorientationism, the Anti Dia, or just a raging bile duct, the practice of mounting sprawling, often infinitely organized, jam-packed carnivalesque installations is making more and more galleries and museums feel like department stores, junkyards, and disaster films. It is an architecture of no architecture, a gesamtkunstwerk or "total artwork," whose roots are in opera, Dada, the Merzbau, and the madhouse. Whatever the subject—be it bodily fluids, pop culture, or politics—terms that describe this sculptural strategy include grandiose and testosterone-driven.

Nowadays this all-at-once gambit can be seen as a way to compete with the paranoia and havoc of everyday life; a homeopathic dose of poison whereby ruins are created to counteract ruin; a manic-depressive panic attack in the face of information overload; a rejoinder to minimalism; a way to fill space and get attention. Good or bad, the New Cacophony is very gendered and very male. Paraphrasing Pompidou curator Christine Macel, New Museum curator Laura Hoptman says, "Women artists accrue like crazy but apparently don't get off as much on making messes." Recent male mess makers include Jason Rhodes, Damien Hirst, Keith Tyson, John Bock, Jonathan Meese, Aidas Bareikis, Thomas Hirschhorn, the late Dieter Roth and Martin Kippenberger, and the living overlord, Paul McCarthy.

At the moment two local shows exemplify this chaos theory: Jon Kessler's whirling-dervish CNN inferno at P.S.1, which is desperate in ways that respond to our quasi-desperate times, and Mike Kelley's high school/hell house/Lawrence Welk extravaganza at Gagosian, which seems desperate for its own sake but still finds Kelley attempting to deepen his familiar themes. Both installations come on in waves of wall-to-wall pandemonium and will strike many as unbearable. Both echo architect Renzo Piano's idea that harbors are "imaginary cities where everything keeps moving." Kelley's "city" is a high-production, multiplex trip into the id; Kessler's is a homemade journey into the group mind. In each, visual syntax is dislocated, onslaught initially overwhelms order, cognitive functions are strained, and surfaces multiply. Kelley's "Day Is Done" is like a variety show scripted by a regression therapist and is far more ritualistic, fictional, and Broadway musical than Kessler's unabashed reality-based foray into politics and terrorism.

Kelley's mini-megalopolis resembles the interior of a cathedral, combined with a Freudian funhouse and a prop shop. Spend time here and the entire installation transforms into an extraordinarily ordered whole. The walls are dotted with found photographs from high school yearbooks. Each picture has been meticulously restaged and re-photographed by Kelley, 51, who then makes videos, sculptures, and paintings based on these Technicolor images. Every pose, prop, and costume derives from the original photographs. It's a maniacal act of replication and multiplication.

As Sol LeWitt generated drawings via language, Kelley has created a remarkable machine that generates art from yearbooks. Although Kelley has risen to new heights of ambition, he's not using this machine to take him or us to new realms. He continues to mine his familiar goth-teen-sex-blasphemy-bad-behavior motifs, albeit in a more bittersweet way. But even with its considerable drive and cleverness, "Day Is Done" feels strangely empty. Instead of deepening, everything keeps coming back to the fact that all this has been generated by the pictures. By now, Kelley's investigation into stereotypes, however heartfelt, is essentially only generating stereotypical Mike Kelleys. "Day Is Done" is an indisputable tour de force; it is the clearest Kelley has ever been. But it is rooted so deeply in corporate festivalism that Kelley's ideas aren't flowering but only accumulating and repeating.

Kessler's hive-mind termite mound is similarly wall-to-wall but harder to pin down. It is physically more obsessive, aggressive, and handmade, and has been generated by current events. The exhibition is a whirl of motion, sound, and images. Kessler, 48, is one of very few artists to address September 11 without being gratuitous or simplistic (for this see Hans Haacke's cliché-ridden Paula Cooper exhibition featuring allusions to the World Trade Center). Kessler gives us jerry-rigged mechanisms that are part Rube Goldberg, part Unabomber shack, and part improvised explosive device and depict snippets of planes flying into buildings, George Bush in military drag, and other scenarios from "the war on terror."

Overall, Kessler's exhibition is like an apocalyptic joyride through the news by way of Nam June Paik's video psychedelia, Cady Noland's pulverized historical vignettes, and William Burroughs's Naked Lunch. It is a pell-mell kaleidoscopic mishmash that reveals a schizoid utopia where all hell breaks loose all the time and human life is twisted as readily as metal. Where Kelley locates himself between high art and folk art, psychic phenomena and the psyche, Kessler casts his line into an ominous philosophical abyss. Adamantly opposed to Baudrillard, who maintains that "reality is a total artifice," "all our values are simulated," and everything is "a game," Kessler essentially says, "All of this, simulated or artifice, is all too real." Kessler asks us to see the news and the world with the skepticism and attention we bring to looking at art. This cognitive feedback loop is electric and illuminating.