

EXHIBITION LEARNING NOTES:

Mike Kelley

This resource has been produced to accompany the exhibition 'Mike Kelley. Vice Anglais' at Hauser & Wirth London from 4 February – 17 April 2025.



Mike Kelley. Photo: Cameron Wittig

About Mike Kelley

Mike Kelley (1954 – 2012) was an influential American artist whose work included performance, installation, video, drawing, painting, photography, sound works, text and sculpture. Kelley drew from a wide spectrum of high and low culture and was known to scour flea markets for America's cast-offs and leftovers. The artist used these everyday materials to question and dismantle Western conceptions of contemporary art and culture. Kelley also addressed the connection between establishment culture and counterculture by shedding light on social rituals and subcultures, whilst mocking the force of institutionalized power.

Originally from a suburb outside of Detroit MI, Kelley attended the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, before moving to Southern California in 1976. Kelley received his MFA from California Institute of the Arts in 1978 and the city of Los Angeles CA became his adopted home and site of his art practice. Starting out in the late 1970s, Kelley became known for performance and installation-based works; he came to prominence in the 1980s with a series of sculptures composed of common craft materials and stuffed animals.

His work later widened in scope and physical scale, exemplified by 'Educational Complex' (1995), the 'Kandors' series (1999 – 2011), 'Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstruction'

series (2000 – 2011), and the posthumously completed public work ‘Mobile Homestead’ (2005 – 2013). These projects included a vast range of media and forms, and underscored several of Kelley’s recurrent themes, such as repressed memory, sexuality, adolescence, class and Americana, which were central to his artistic praxis. Throughout his career, Kelley also worked on curatorial projects, collaborated with many artists and musicians, and produced a large body of critical and creative writing.

What does the exhibition look like?

The exhibition is centered around the video, ‘Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstruction #36 (Vice Anglais)’ (2011), one of the last videos Kelley ever created. This film is from his Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstruction (EAPR) series (2000 – 2011), where Kelley set out to make 365 videos and video installations, one for each day of the year. The series of ‘video narratives’ were often accompanied by sculptural installations of partial or full stage sets.

‘Vice Anglais’ centers on six parodic characters, M’Lord, Pile Driver, Skank, Poof and Josette, alongside an allegorical personification, Golden Rod. In the video, these protagonists are depicted in a series of scenarios that explore power relations and masculinity and suggest rather than show sexual violence.

The exhibition also presents ‘Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstruction #36B (Made in England)’ (2011), a companion video to ‘Vice Anglais.’ ‘Made in England’ presents the script for ‘Vice Anglais,’ spoken by voice-over actors and ‘performed’ by a still-life arrangement of British decorative objects, like a puppet show.

The show also includes a series of never-before exhibited paintings of the cast of transgressive characters, drawing on the tradition of theatrical character and costume studies, as well as a lenticular lightbox featuring a still from EAPR #36 and sculptures made using props from the video.



Installation view, ‘Mike Kelley. Vice Anglais,’ Hauser & Wirth London, 2025 © Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts. All Rights Reserved/VAGA at ARS, NY. Courtesy Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts. Photo: Alex Delfanne



Mike Kelley, Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstruction #36 (Vice Anglais), 2011 © Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts. All Rights Reserved/VAGA at ARS, NY. Courtesy Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts. Photo: Genevieve Hanson

What are the major themes within the exhibition?

Memory

Kelley explores the nature of memory across this exhibition. A precursor to the EAPR series is Mike Kelley's 'Educational Complex' (1995), which portrays an architectural model of all the educational institutions he attended rendered from memory, with forgotten spaces left empty. Exploring the public fascination with repressed memory syndrome, the inability to recall traumatic events, Kelley produced his EAPR videos to fill in these blank spaces.

Additionally, in 'Vice Anglais,' Kelley's group of sadists reside in the immense installation 'Kandor 10B (Exploded Fortress of Solitude)' (2011), a cave-like environment that includes a glass bell jar housing a sculptural depiction of Kandor, the fictional home of comic book hero Superman. The images Kelley gathered from the comics as sources for his Kandors series revealed an inconsistency in representations of the city, which he explored as part of his wider fascination with the vagaries of memory.

Violence and power dynamics

While many elements of the exhibition imply violence, the title of the main video in the show, 'Vice Anglais,' directly refers to sadomasochism. Violence becomes explicit towards the end of the video in a scene focused on M'Lord, a kerchief carrying fop, and Josette, a damsel who is dressed in a white wedding dress and handcuffed. Rather than exploring sexual license as an end in itself, Kelley's work uses this pantomime-farce portrayal of sexualized threat and violence to explore the pervasiveness of repressed trauma and to parody the imposition of patriarchy, institutionalized power and corrupt instruction. Using props from his videos, Kelley also made sculptural forms such as 'Bumper Car and Hobby Horse' (2011), echoing the intensity of the final scene in 'Vice Anglais'.

Education and counterculture

Kelley's work draws on a carnivalesque and subversive spirit at odds with the institutional nature of the education system. In light of this, the EAPR works evoke concepts that belong to counterculture, including ideas of 'deschooling society.' Kelley utilized humor and playfulness to encourage people to learn how to think for themselves, rather than assimilate to the norms that are engrained within the wider Westernized social system.



Mike Kelley, No Title (character painting of Poof for EAPR 36/ Vice Anglais), 2011 © Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts. All Rights Reserved/VAGA at ARS, NY. Courtesy Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts. Photo: Keith Lubow

What inspired Kelley's work?

For the EAPR series, Kelley drew his inspiration for each video from his large collection of found archival images and high school yearbooks depicting amateur extracurricular activities that have a strong relationship to popular and folk entertainments.

Kelley's last two videos, 'Vice Anglais' and 'Made in England' (2011), are examples of how toward the end of his career, he produced works that increasingly involved an elaborate web of references and associations. 'Vice Anglais' and 'Made in England' are both in part based on a free interpretation of the life of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, co-founder of the Pre-Raphaelites, taking inspiration from Robert M. Cooper's book 'Lost on Both Sides, Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Critic and Poet' (1970):

As well as being influenced by feature films by British film director Ken Russell, Kelley's videos are reminiscent of gothic 'Hammer Horror' films and the comic travesty and bawdiness of the 'Carry-On' films, both produced in the UK from the 1950s to the 1970s and which represent expressions of anti-establishment and popular subcultures.

As with the lenticulars (lightboxes with three-dimensional effects) produced for his Kandors, Kelley layered his source material with his own reproductions as part of his EAPR works, where characters from 'Vice Anglais' are presented.



Installation view, 'Mike Kelley. Vice Anglais,' Hauser & Wirth London, 2025 © Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts. All Rights Reserved/VAGA at ARS, NY. Courtesy Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts. Photo: Alex Delfanne



Mike Kelley, No Title (character painting of Pile Driver for EAPR 36/Vice Anglais) (detail), 2011 © Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts. All Rights Reserved/VAGA at ARS, NY. Courtesy Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts. Photo: Keith Lubow

What other artists does his work relate to?

Nicole Eisenman (b. 1965) is a French American artist well known for her sculptures and paintings. The artist often explores themes surrounding power, humor, identity and pop culture.

Richard Jackson (b. 1939) is an American contemporary artist whose work is influenced by both abstract expressionism and action painting, exploring a performative painting process that furthers the potential of painting by upending its technical conventions.

Paul McCarthy (b. 1945) is an American contemporary artist known for visceral, often hauntingly humorous work in a variety of mediums—from performance, photography, film and video, to sculpture, drawing and painting.

Jason Rhoades (1965 – 2006) was an American artist for whom sculpture and myth were intertwined forms of construction. His epic assemblage installations established him as a force of the international art world in the 1990s.

Gary Simmons (b. 1964) is an American contemporary artist whose work explores the politics of race, class and social stereotypes through painting, sculpture, sound and architectural environments. Simmons uses imagery drawn from popular culture to create works that address personal and collective memories.

Glossary

Abstract expressionism

A post-World War II art movement that was created in New York City in the 1940s that is defined by intuition and spontaneity.

Action painting

A style of painting that focuses on the actual physical act of painting.

Anti establishment

A belief that opposes conventional social, political and economic outlooks and agendas.

Assemblage

A three-dimensional work of art made from combinations of materials including found or purchased objects.

Counterculture

A cultural group that actively challenges norms, created by the dominant cultural group, through its practices and beliefs.

Costume studies

The study of theatrical clothing and textiles and how to produce costume garments for the performing arts.

Institutionalized

A modality of thinking that is controlled or sustained under an established organization.

Pantomime-farce

Pantomime is a theatrical art form that uses gestures to convey a story. While farce is a form of comedy, the two can be combined within a performance.

Patriarchy

A societal system in which men hold the most power.

Subculture

One cultural group with distinct characteristics which sits under a larger cultural group.

Subversive

Seeking to interrupt an established system.

Transgressive

Violating or challenging socially accepted standards of behavior, belief, morality or taste.

Supplementary research

[Electronic Arts Intermix: At Home with Mike Kelley: Day is Done](#)

[Hauser & Wirth: Mike Kelley](#)

[Hauser & Wirth YouTube: Mike Kelley: John C. Welchman in Conversation with Ralph Rugoff](#)

[Hauser & Wirth YouTube: Mike Kelley: Kandors \(1999 – 2011\), Hauser & Wirth London](#)

[Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts](#)

[The Art Newspaper: Stuffed animals, Superman and communing with spirits: the wacky world of Mike Kelley explored in Tate Modern survey](#)

[Ursula: Gerard Melanga on Mike Kelley, 1954 – 2012](#)

[Ursula: Christina Quarles on Mike Kelley](#)

[Ursula: Cross Gender / Cross Genre](#)

[Ursula: Peter Pakesch Introduces ‘Mike Kelley. God’s Oasis’](#)

[Ursula: From God’s Oasis to Missing Time and Beyond](#)

[Ursula: Mike Kelley: Mister Memory](#)