

The Artist as Adolescent

by Howard Singerman

Artists and critics have tended to explain the artist's worth in, and position outside of, society in shorthand and by analogy with the phrase "the artist as ———." The phrase, which forms the title of this piece as it does the titles and subtitles of a number of articles from Jack Burnham's "The Artist as Shaman" and Germano Celant's "The Artist as Nomad" to Ad Reinhardt's "The Artist as . . .", a written work that fills in the blank from the Twelfth century forward, is usually completed with what could be termed—loosely—an occupation. And that occupation is most often extinct. Among Reinhardt's sixty-some parallels for the Twentieth century artist are the metaphysician, mystic, saint, priest, magician, monk, teacher, protestor, hero and outlaw. To his list one can add a few more colloquial labels, as witnessed by the fashions, the uniforms and the language of the artworld; the artist as artiste, the artist as cowboy, the artist as socialite and the artist as vanguard worker.

Beyond the equally tenuous relationship with society, the applicability as well as the popularity of these occupations as sobriquets for the artist lies in their sense of duty. They are popular role models because they fulfill a role—society is rewarded by their separateness. Historically or perhaps fictionally, they share a clear view of the society from which they seceded and they share the responsibility for it. They are endowed by the same sources with morality, romance and *camaraderie* or quietude. And they are society's equals, separated by choice or consciousness in the case of the outlaw, monk and mystic, or its betters, annointed and elevated by it like the hero and the saint.

While the artist as adolescent shares with the preceding models the badge of alienation, his is neither a predilection nor an occupational hazard. He is separated not by choice or divine providence but by a fact of life. As explanations and role models, the adolescent's predecessors, implying both choice and equality, gave the artist control of his alienation and made it the province of the artist and the validation of his expression. The adolescent implies, or is meant to imply, that alienation is a position neither of equality nor the better view but one of subordination and myopia. It is not the province of the artist but is instead crippling democratic. As a model the idea of the adolescent makes the individualism and the corollary responsibility inherent in its forerunners suspect and replaces it with an insistence on the self that is obsessive, willful and indistinguished—adjectives which, not coincidentally, have been leveled against much of what has been called Post Modernism.

In fact, that correspondence underlies my premise: the adolescent is the role model for Post Modernism. Art in

America and the artists making it now have a common birthday somewhere around 1950—Post Modernism's practitioners are all baby-boom progeny. Adolescence is an invention of modern society, rather than a biological fact, and the baby-boom was state-of-the-art adolescence. The generation that came of age, or didn't, in the late '60s and early '70s was accused of having the longest adolescence on record. And it was an adolescence extended at both ends—as a generation it was pitied as well for having no childhood. We grew up with enough money and enough products targeted at that money to reify and standardize our adolescence.

The artist's connection to some sort of generic youngster is not new. Modernist critics have made frequent reference to the child—most often with the adjectives childlike and childish, the former as an accolade and the latter as an insult. The childlike has a history in this century, a lineage from Rousseau and the Fauves through Klee, Chagall and Marc. And the innocent, the noble savage, the primitive and the child are all on Reinhardt's list. They are models for the Modernist and his attempts to return to a state of innocence, to shed the cultural and societal influences that shackle his creativity. The attempt is a paradoxical and dated one—on the one hand it dismisses the value of culture but on the other it presumes a primal culture, the collective unconscious, that precludes the individual. In fact the adjective childlike endows the child, or the noble savage, and by association the artist, with a pair of unaffected yet somehow appreciative and curiously adult eyes and the adult goals of innocence, trust and straightforwardness.

The adjective childish is an accusation of nontranscendence, of willfully being a child. It implies self-consciousness, the consciousness even in children of being a child, and it negates both the ideal and the innocent. While both adjectives are reflections of adult society, they are not mirror images. To be childlike is to fulfill an adult wish/image of the universe of children. To be childish is to fail at fulfilling adult expectations. These expectations become requirements in adolescence, more frequent and no more easily met, and the adolescent, in his conscious quest for corruption, is by definition more childish than the child. Thus, while the artist as adolescent shares with the artist as innocent the look backward in time, he is shortsighted. His focus is not on the precultural but on the newly socialized.

Before going further I should finally introduce the fictional or rather clinical adolescent I have been talking about. In contrast to adolescence's elongated manifestation—and suggesting its pathological nature (the disease being society's)—the individual adolescent is marked by his

attempts not to be one, to get over or out of it. Or as a popular psychologist might put it, "Adolescence is the bridge between childhood and adulthood and the traffic, even in the normal child, isn't one way." The child and the desires of childhood reassess themselves and resist the transformation that is the goal of adolescence. Those goals (chosen from a list about half again as long that opens Luella Cole's *The Psychology of Adolescence*) provide a schematic of the adolescent and his psychological and social attributes, a societal definition of the adult and, parenthetically, a primer of Post Modernism's drawbacks. Adolescence then is the rocky passage from destructive expressions of emotion to harmless or helpful ones; from a subjective, egocentric view of reality to an objective one where reality is separate from emotion; from fear and "childish" motives to "adult" stimuli; from escapism to problem solving; from an acute awareness of sexual development to casualness; from gender segregation to comfortableness with the opposite sex; from social awkwardness to poise; from intolerance to acceptance; from a desire for facts to a desire for explanation; from many varying and unfocused interests to a few stable ones; from a wish for glamorous occupations and a toying with many futures to an acceptance of a single, realizable one; and from an indifference of general principles to an understanding of those principles. While it is not surprising that in this decade a number of those goals were questioned, the sum of those adult attributes would be either the *Übermensch* or a bore, perhaps the reason lies in the generation questioning.

The young adolescent increasingly attempts to place himself in the adult world, testing its roles, occupation and technology. But his involvement with the objects and knowledge of society is in part a product of those ulterior or "childish" motives and is marked by fascination, obsession and expended energy rather than commitment and endeavor. As the adolescent begins to define himself in relation to adult society, he attempts a relationship he cannot fulfill. Not surprisingly, he begins confused and often finishes at odds with, but no less dependent on, that society.

Thus far, with my concentration on youth and this last hint at rebellion, I have strengthened not weakened the adolescent's links to Modernism. Modernism, after all, was populated by young artists, at times it seems to the exclusion of all others. And in his interview with Robert Hughes on *The Shock of the New*, Hilton Kramer characterized the struggle between bourgeois society and the *avant garde* that has marked Modernism as a family argument—a generation gap. But there are, at least from our peculiar vantage point, basic differences

between the artists and movements of the European *avant garde* and the artists as adolescents of Post Modernism. The most obvious is an idea of the *avant garde*—the idea of progress. The European artists of the first quarter of this century, whatever their actual motivations, have been endowed by history with a commitment to the future. They have left us as historical documents the written rhetoric of conviction and commitment with which each movement superceded the preceding one. Their publicized nihilism was tempered and even contradicted by their righteous indignation and utopian proclamations. All of Modernism has been marked by this rhetorical morality which drives its primitivism and purism. It endows the art with a sort of broadcast objectivity and the promise that the artist believes in his product. Even in its most *épater le bourgeois* vanguards, in fact especially in those vanguards, there was an obvious conviction, an indignation which bespoke the seriousness of the endeavor and tied the artists and their product to their heritage.

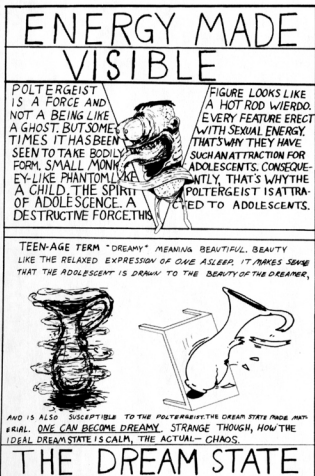
Modernism's messages have been like its style—where the latter is international, the former is universal. But an increasing number of artists seem unable to mean the big meaning because they are equally unable to use Modernism's pedantic tone. In contrast to the ongoing commitment of the Modernist artist to his imagery, material and history, the commitment that has allowed us to read and believe abstract painting and enables it to mean, the Post Modernist tends to the episodic, the compulsive focusing of energy and the equally compulsive release. In place of the rhetorical involvement and moral conviction of the modernist, he substitutes an attenuated attention span and a situational ethic, both equally rhetorical, or perhaps congruently theatrical. Where the Modernist presumably constructs his images to present his world view and represent his conviction, the Post Modernist's images, though heated, are detached and deracinated, chosen through an unjudging but riveted fascination with the societal product—chosen at random rather than molded in process.

While most of the hot art that arose in response to the coolness of Minimalism—political, narrative and autobiographical art—has been labeled Post Modernist, they are labeled incorrectly. They have an ideological base that separates them from Post Modernism and the adolescent. In fact ideology is the antidote to adolescence. When the Feminist movement brought the confessional autobiography into the artworld in the early 1970s with the slogan "the personal is political" it was on strictly Modernist terms. The personal is bared

objectively—translated for broadcast—and the act of confession as well as the confessor are endowed with Modernist morality. The artist declares an individuality which is both celebrated and pressed into societal service by ideology; the first person serves the third. At the risk of turning the easy phrase, for the adolescent the third person is an extension of the first. While Post Modernism is irrepressibly idiosyncratic, it is irresponsibly so—it is couched in the third person.

I have labeled Post Modernism adolescent, willful, childish, irresponsible, and indistinguished and I have hinted that it is both amoral and ahistorical, so before I go further—before I name names—I should back off a little and insert a caveat. I would rather be thought-provoking than inflammatory, and I have, as do both the adolescent and Post Modernist, a desire for reconciliation with, and usefulness in, the dominant culture. The labels, first of all, are not meant as pejoratives, rather they are descriptions and they describe the characteristics of the art—not the artists. Although the title and terms that I have used are personality traits—that is psychological ones, I am not attempting to psychoanalyze the makers but to understand the art. That an understanding is grounded in psychoanalysis is not coincidental. As Mike Robinson, a painter and critic, pointed out in conversation a few years ago, Freud has been reappointed the artworld's psychologist and has replaced Jung, who held office in the '50s and again in the late '70s, and a number of perceptual psychologists who filled the gap in the '60s. The two artists I will mention are smart, serious and sane and their willfulness and childishness, while it is poignant and energized, is in part a rhetorical and tactical critique of Modernism. Post-Modernism is neither a coup nor a cure for art or its superstructure.

While there are an increasing number of artists quoting the images and preoccupations of the 1950s, which as a decade has become a sort of shorthand for adolescence, I would like to look briefly at two performance artists, Chris Burden and Michael Kelley, whose works not only quote the specifics of both historical and chronological age but whose demeanor echoes the adolescent's. My premise and my title had their origins in two specific works, the first of each artist's I had seen live, *The Citadel* by Burden and *The Monitor and the Merrimack* by Kelley. Burden's cast metal space ships suspended on monofilament in a small darkened room and his prerecorded science fiction dialogue in *The Citadel* and Kelley's wooden models of the civil war ironclads and his accompanying antic lesson in American history share a common source in the baby-boom adolescent. It is a source that is evident in the traditionally male-identified



Mike Kelley: The Poltergeist 1979.

and societally-specific toys that form the central images in each work and in the language that embellishes them—Burden's dialogue alternates between Trekkian galactic history and its noble future and listings of imaginary facts and figures; Kelley's, drawn from school learning, is disjointed, wandering and dumbly scatological.

Since the *B-Car* in 1976, most of Burden's work has been involved with technology and its involvement can be divided into two loose categories—working models like the *B-Car*, *C.B.T.V.* and to an extent, *The Big Wheel*, and works that rely on the trappings, most often the language and roles, of technology like *The Reason for the Neutron Bomb*, *Solaris* and *The Citadel*. While his involvement with technology ties Burden to artists as disparate as Newton and Helen Harrison, Keith Sonnier, Gary Lloyd, and a tradition since Constructivism, he is less metaphysical than Sonnier, less metaphorical than Oppenheim or Aycock, and less well-meaning and straightforward than Lloyd and the Harrisons. Although his models, like theirs, carry a certain Medieval air—the products of a re-artisanized workshop, they tend to be rhetorically and pictorially machine-like and curiously anthropomorphic—his goals are not to humanize technology or mystify its potential but to mimic it. Like the adolescent with a crystal radio set, Burden absorbs facts and parades knowledge.

The *B-Car* from 1976, which Burden designed and built by trial and error in the extremely short, but predetermined time of two months, had a top speed of 50 mph and got about 150 mpg. *C.B.T.V.*, which followed the *B-Car* in 1977, is a replica of an early precursor of the television. Together they are recreations of the two dictators of culture at this end of the country at least; but Burden is not judging them. In fact he seems unconcerned with their power, actual or metaphorical, or their previous incarnations—obviously judged or used as judge—in the works of George Brecht of Ed Kienholz. His Yankee ingenuity, his clear fascination with their workings subverts the expected criticism of the society that created them.

The Reason for the Neutron Bomb, a work from the second category, also avoids the expected criticism of its rather controversial subject. With 50,000 nickels topped with 50,000 kitchen matches, each pair representing a Warsaw Pact tank maintained by the Soviets and "aimed" at Western Europe, Burden presents the stated reason for the neutron bomb. While his obsessive involvement with both form and fact and his medium may belittle the Pentagon's logic (Burden originally planned to use toy tanks but found them too expensive), it also mimics it. He presents the facts

baldly. They are seen as valid and even valuable information, but at the same time as unjudged, fascinating and amoral facts. He begs the bomb's moral and political implications.

Burden's subjects are loaded, especially in an artworld that fancies itself as aware of and beyond sexual stereotypes, political wrong-headedness and the tools of Imperialism. But we expect him to share our awareness and our politics and we read his works through those expectations, seeing them as satires and condemnations or dismissing them as childish provocation. But Burden's preoccupations beg his values and what is finally judged by his work is the class that consumes it, the liberal bourgeois. While it is in that sense borderline Modernism, it has redrawn the traditional Modernist lines. It is not a critique of bourgeois moralism from the left or of middle-class complacency from the future, but a critique of the artworld's liberal humanism from what appears the irresponsible right and may just be real life.

On a more facile level, Burden's works are obsessed with speed, an obsession that separates them from his art-tech peers and ties them to the subject, the adolescent, and his well-documented craving for locomotion. And there are further, equally easily recognized, ties to the adolescent—Burden's interest in locomotion is translated into toy spaceships, rubber band airplanes and military models and decals. The adolescent he recalls is stridently male as are the roles his props offer—the pilot, the general and, in *The Big Job*, the trucker. They are the sexually segregated and societally condoned role enforcers of postwar America. In exchange for the values they enforce, they offer the adolescent not only speed—adolescent transcendence—but the dual succors of risk and adventure on the one hand and belonging and regimentation on the other.

In contrast to the topicality and the emblematic images that continue to tie Burden's work to Modernism, Mike Kelley's art exists in a sort of energized past tense. Since the infamous *Shoot*, Burden's work has been characterized by a single graphic ornamental image that "is" the work—which in turn endows the work with a palpable, material feel—that is, to use the Modernist term, presence. And the work's topicality exaggerates its presence, it provides a sense of presentness, an involvement with the contemporary that has been a key to the Modernist object since Courbet's *Burial at Ornans*. Kelley's work lacks both presence and presentness and offers instead an alternating braggadoccio and withdrawal. Where Burden's props exhibit a materiality that transcends language, Kelley's are victims of language. While Kelley uses a good many props, he

used a disjointed but at the same time infallible logic to wrench multiple meanings, often opposed and always disjunct from a single object, leaving it empty and even dissolved. The objects themselves are often idiosyncratic—made for the purpose of being denied. And he begs the question of presentness as well as presence; Kelley's performances are views of a distant historical and cultural past, or rather its tracks, from a not so distant personal and societal one.

The adolescent is the specific subject of two of Kelley's works, the *Poltergeist*, an installation of prose and photographs are done with David Askevold in 1978, and *Monkey Island*, a performance from 1980. In contrast to Burden's cool teenager, Kelley's is hot—he is confused where Burden is at odds. The poltergeist and the monkey are both humanoid and both, to quote from the *Poltergeist*, "small like a child but always in heat, not innocent at all...little enough to fit in your pants but won't stay contained, always making itself obvious...a red hot weirdo of the kind that are fancied by adolescents, where every feature is tumescent, bulging eyes, lolling tongue, thousands of erect bumps all over the face, the rat fink."

Compulsive and uncontrolled, they are embodiments of an undirected sexual energy, a demonic presence, and Kelley is obsessed by them. They picture the adolescent as pitiful and adolescence as painful. In contrast to the natural sexuality in a natural setting of Rousseau or Gauguin or *The Blue Lagoon*, Kelley presents sexuality as a biological mistake, the way the adolescent sees it—intrusive and incriminating.

While *Monkey Island* is the only one of Kelley's performances to feature his adolescent stand-in, it powers the others as well. Kelley's performances are hot, scattered, fast-paced and energized—a succession of repressions and explosions. While the viewer can pick out fragments and ravelings of a narrative, the performances' sole gestalt is one of expended energy. He forces references and narrative from his props, separating meaning from object by reading and rereading its attributes, reinterpreting and realigning its generics and specifics—its shape, physical appearance, historical background, material make-up, cultural implications and societal use—with his physical antics and never stopping, always shifting dialogue. With his adenoidal monotone he completes the operation, making even his words seem separate from, and self-conscious in, language. He recreates publicly an adolescent reality; the objects that surround him, the subjects they elicit and the language that drives them are again severed from their standard roles and subordinated to the ego.

The connections Kelley draws are often scatological and their etymologies within the performance retrace and recall the way in which adolescents endow objects with sexual meanings, a ritual in which the more common the object and less traceable the connection the better. His logic links the unknown and the abstract with the very real and energized in much the same way sexual identification charges what we learn in school. Kelley draws his material from school learning, often Catholic school learning, but his use of that material, while specific, avoids the autobiographical or the confessional. Rather he uses the trappings of Catholic school and its religious sublimation or subversion of reality as both a cause and an analogue for the adolescent's subversion.

The ostensible subjects of most of his performances have been history and geography, the child's first social studies, and reflecting both the child's and the society's egocentrism they are American history and geography. While the self-conscious sexual energy of adolescence translates the lessons of history and geography into a metaphor for that energy, they also deconstruct the various categories of adult reality. Thus the same features of California's Ojai Valley that refer to the smells and products of the body's nether regions in Kelley's *Three Valleys* make reference to and are reexamined through St. Thomas Aquinas, for example, and through less specific incarnations of philosophy, history and economics. But like his voice, Kelley's subjects are uninflected, the philosopher is no more understood, important or cherished that geology or sex, and his issues are just as easily bent.