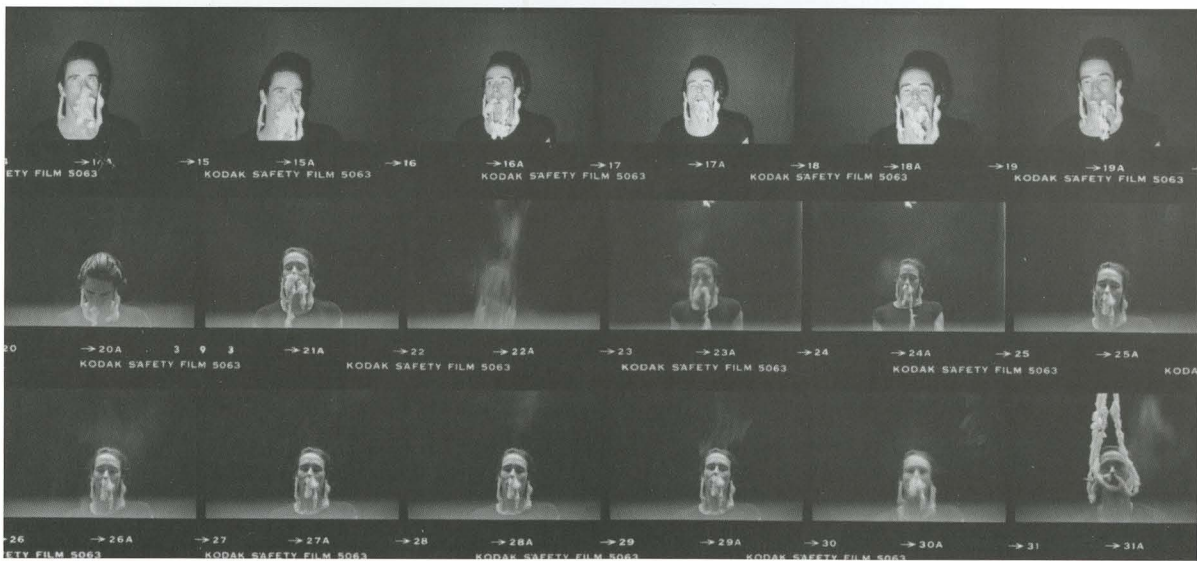
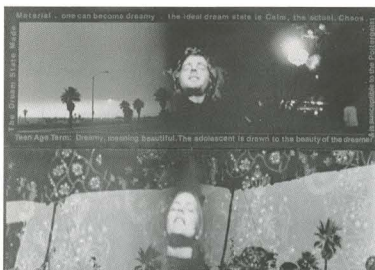




LEFT AND BELOW *The Poltergeist*, 1979, a collaboration between David Askevold and Mike Kelley, six colour photographs and text, overall 101.6 x 762 cm. Collection: the artist.

BOTTOM Production stills for *The Poltergeist*. These stills represent a session in the construction of ectoplasm.





Rotating Chandelier, video, 1990, 35 minutes, colour, stereo.

DAVID ASKEVOLD: THE CALIFORNIA YEARS

Mike Kelley

David Askevold has asked me write a short account of his years in California, specifically the period of the late seventies to the early eighties. This short essay in no way will attempt to address the complexity of David's artistic practice – that would require a book, not an essay. His work is so elusive and multi-layered that it escapes easy description. Even though David's work has been the object of my consideration for many years, I am still mystified by it. Works by David that I saw twenty years ago continue to intrigue me. My task here is a simpler, biographical, approach. I will attempt to describe in a very general way the shared artistic milieu, as I understood it.

David came to California at the same time that I did and for the same reason – to work at the California Institute of the Arts (Cal Arts), but he came to teach there; I came as a student. Before I arrived at Cal Arts, I was unfamiliar with David's art, but this was not surprising since the school where I had done my undergraduate work was oblivious to the world of Conceptual art, and David is a conceptual artist, though a somewhat unusual one by conventional definitions of the term. I had attended one of those frumpy state university programs that never got past the influence of the New York School of painting. David, on the other hand, had taught at one of the most vanguard art schools, the Nova Scotia School of Art and Design in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. Even though David was an American from one of the Great Plains states, somehow or other he ended up in Canada. I don't know how, but I do know that he was a teacher famous for applying the strategies of Post-Minimalist art practice to the classroom. I suppose this is why he had been invited to teach at Cal Arts.

At first I found Cal Arts to be a very alien environment. I was suddenly faced with a group of artists and a set of art terminologies that were completely foreign to me. The faculty was composed primarily of Conceptual artists, and photography accompanied by text was definitely one of the dominant methodologies: "photo/text" was its abbreviated designation. A number of my teachers – John Baldessari, Laurie Anderson, Douglas Huebler, Robert Cumming and David Askevold – made photo/text works. This is quite a diverse group of artists, and they approached this manner of working in different ways, but I did perceive them as being linked aesthetically in one way, and that was that they all seemed to be attempting to free themselves from the reductionism associated with the so-called first generation of Conceptual artists. By this I mean the well-known group of artists connected with Seth Siegelaub in New York: Lawrence Wiener, Joseph Kosuth, Robert Barry and the early Douglas Huebler. Baldessari's humour, Anderson's folksy storytelling, Cumming's flat-footed absurdity, and Huebler's increasing referential density, were at odds with the tautological simplicity of much first-wave Conceptualism.

Narrative is another point of contention. All of the artists of the Cal Arts group addressed, in one way or another, narrative issues in their work. This ranged from the overt – Anderson's flow of anecdotes, or Huebler's *Crocodile Tears* (1981) project, rooted in a film script proposal – to the implied, as in Baldessari's *Blasted Allegories* (1974), with its seemingly random collection of tinted photographs of television programs paired with words and arranged horizontally like scenes in a storyboard.

It was David's work that appealed to me most directly. His work struck me as the strangest, the most dense, and the scariest of the lot. Narrative, in his work, was the most stretched; it allowed me access, but was also oblique to the point of leaving me disoriented. *The Ambit: Nine Clauses and Their Allocations* (1976) was one of the first art works by David that I saw. It consists of nine four-part colour photo-panels that "illustrate" a text; the closest description that I can come up with is to say that it is a kind of psychotic legalese. The text is descriptive, it states rules, sets conditions, but you don't know of, or for what. The photographs, equally opaque, consist of murky depictions of light and shadow, material textures and glistening watery reflections. There is a continuity of language and image usage that provides formal closure, but the sense, finally, is one more of mood than narrative meaning. The combined effect of the image/text pairing is akin to reading an overly complex contract while enveloped in a twilight fog after coming down from a heavy dose of cough syrup. Oddly enough, I find this extremely pleasurable.

Conceptual art could be loosely defined as a movement that attempted to point out and play with the pictorial tropes of the presentation of "knowledge." This often took the form of parodied recreations of page-layouts in academic textbooks: bland documentary photographs accompanied by redundant footnotes, and absurd charts, graphs, maps and diagrams. David's work hardly ever addressed this area. Instead, he is drawn to the world of arcane knowledge – the hard-to-pinpoint logic of rambling unselfconscious bar conversation, the free-floating mind in a zoned out daydream mode. He favours the poetics of the pseudo-sciences, such as pop psychology and the occult. Yet the work does not strike me as Surrealist. Its rendition of a stream of consciousness is too obviously a

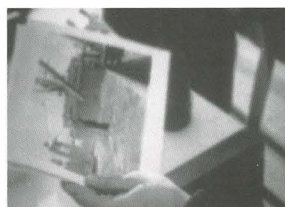
structured fabrication. It is un-natural, but too seemingly “analytical” to come off as dandyish posturing. I have at times thought of David’s work as a structuralist take on Kenneth Anger’s psycho-sexual film rituals – definitely an unlikely, contradictory project. Can delirium, while being experienced, be analyzed? Wouldn’t doing that disrupt the delirium’s seductive, mysterious qualities? David seems to have his cake and eat it too. He is a disorientation scientist.

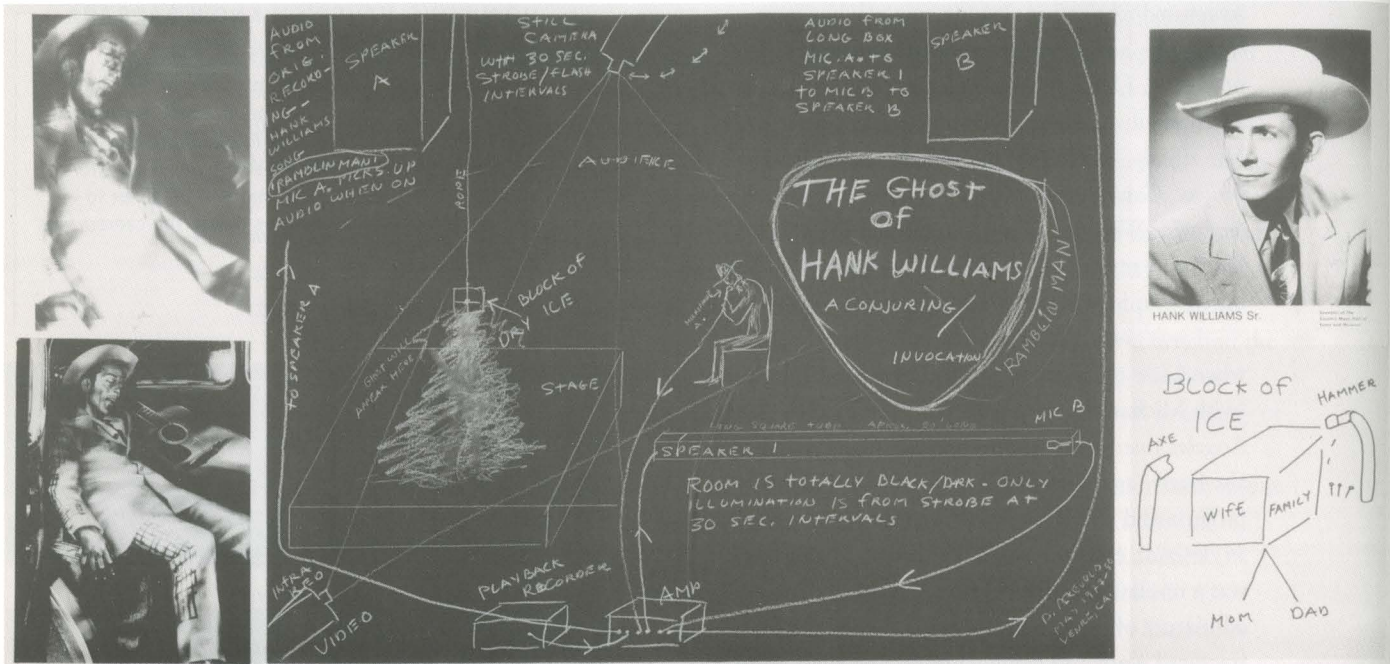
I was given a crash course in Askevold in 1977, when I saw the work in his studio; at an exhibition (with Michael Asher and Richard Long) at the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art (LAICA), an alternative space; and in a compilation of artists’ projects and writings, *Individuals: Post-Movement Art in America*, edited by Alan Sondheim. David’s writing was a revelation to me. I was taken aback by the odd admixture of game-like strategies, Burroughs-ish fractured word and genre pairings, and their weird ritualistic overtones. Not since reading Lautréamont had I been so moved by poetry – poetry – I don’t what else to call it. David’s perverse misuse of logic structures, unusual applications of pulp-fiction tropes and his unembarrassed, romantic, imagistic revellings, were unlike anything I had seen before. All of the positive aspects of the rapture of mysticism were there – the ritual, the opulence, the inebriation, the rich and elusive symbology – yet mysticism’s negative aspect, its faith, was removed. This was ART, not religion, and its pleasures were material and constructed. Surrender to spectacle need not be mindless was the message, as I perceived it.

A combined interest in the poetics and structure of occult ritual and imagery led to *The Poltergeist* (1979), a collaborative work between David and myself. We each researched the literature on the supposed phenomena and produced two separate bodies of work – a series of large-scale photographs that were exhibited at the Foundation for Art

HOW LONG HAVE YOU KNOW BARBARA
1986-87, 21:30 minutes, colour, stereo

This tape began as a notion to do a parody about ‘issue’ itself, as if that could be an issue. Six people play themselves or take on a role and profession believable to themselves. No script was used short of an outline, and on-set instructions were given to participants often just minutes before the camera was turned on.





The Ghost of Hank Williams, a conjuring/invocation, 1977-79, colour and black & white photographs and drawings, 62 x 117 cm. Collection: Gerald Ferguson, Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Resources (FAR) in 1979. FAR, an alternative space and artists' project funding organization, co-directed by David's then-wife Christina Ritchie, was one of the first spaces in Los Angeles to present works by some of the younger neo-Conceptualists, such as the films of Jack Goldstein and the performances of Matt Mullican. In addition to showing the photographic series, the exhibition included an evening presentation of David's new videotape *Bliss D.F.²* (1977), a light-hearted work, at least for David, that included a dialogue describing how to shrink a human head using avocados as stand-ins, while simultaneously the voice of a sex therapist drones on. I also presented the performance *The Monitor and the Merrimac*.

Several of the photographs in this series make reference to early twentieth century spiritualist photography. Both David and I were interested in this photographic tradition, especially, I believe, because of how it illuminated Conceptual art's photographic assumptions. The transparent quality of photographic usage in much Conceptualist art production was problematic to me. The photograph was meant to be looked through – for the information it contained – as in traditional documentary photography. Spiritualist photography problematized this reading, since, at one time, these photographs were perceived as actual depictions of supernatural occurrences. The viewer's increased familiarity with photographic technology had now rendered these fabrications laughable as documentation. This shift from a naturalistic reading to the recognition of the photograph as a staged event problematized the believability of any photograph as a transparent record of an actual event.

At a 1977 exhibition at LAICA, David had made an installation consisting of a video bar, where viewers could relax and watch the videotape *John Todd and his Songs* (1977). (Before describing this tape, I must make an aside, and explain to the reader what a video bar is. In this pre-MTV period the only place one could see art videos, and their bastard cousin, the emerging underground of self-produced rock videos, was at alternative spaces or certain hipster discos, where video DJs would project them. For a short time, attempts were made to start up video bars – sort of a bohemian version of the sports bar – where one could have a drink and watch videos presented on television monitors behind the bar. This fad never caught on, probably because of the rise of music video on regular broadcast television.) David's videotape documented the extemporaneous songs and performances of John Todd, a student at the University of California at Irvine. In addition to the performances, the tape documented Todd's interaction with fellow students in a crit class situation.

This tape and another tape from the same year, *Very Soon You Will* (1977), were controversial at the time because of the issues they raised about authorship and the moral duties of artists who use other people in their work. Todd was to edit the video footage to produce his own version of the documentary, but as far as I know this never occurred. And judging by the student, as depicted in the documentary, it seems very unlikely that this was ever a possibility. In *Very Soon You Will*, David, off-screen, adopts the manner of a therapist or acid-trip guide, and leads a woman through a mental exploration of her own death. It was David's role as the instigator in these works that upset people, as he set up situations that could, and did, progress into unsettling territory, while he himself was distant, almost not present at all, as if the situations he set up were natural occurrences.

Critiques of power relationships were in the air

HONKY TONKIN

1986, 4:30 minutes, colour, stereo

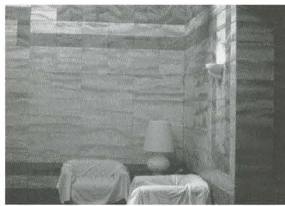
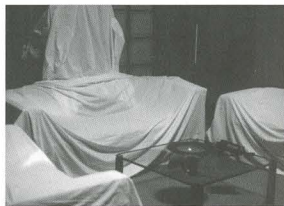
A classically trained musician learns the lyrics and tune, live on tape, of Hank Williams' 'Honky Tonkin,' prompted and coached by a friend over a period of time until she gets it right. Images of customers in a costume and mask shop preparing their dress and makeup for Halloween night are cut into the music session.



SIX FIFTY

1987-89, 22 minutes, colour, stereo

The correlations of aloneness, homelessness, death and being ungrounded are reinforced by shots of an aging homeless man and location shots that are interwoven with this material: one of the 'Mount Royal' television series sets in Montreal, Quebec; The Four Seasons Taxidermy Shop; The Cameron House; and the Union train station in Toronto. The title refers to the rent paid for a basement apartment in downtown Toronto.



and conspiracy theories abounded: the media buried secret subliminal messages in advertising, Satanist rock stars inserted slogans, backwards, into their records, cults were growing by leaps and bounds, and feminist readings of the hierarchies of university life made both students and teachers hyper-aware of the dangers of fraternization. In this milieu, it was asking for trouble to work with students at all.

In the same exhibition at LAICA, that included the video bar, Michael Asher presented a work where he hired a number of people, primarily students, I believe, to simply hang around the gallery when it was open. For this they were paid something akin to minimum wage. In the exhibition catalogue, several of these employees wrote statements describing their experience of Asher's work; it was obvious that they felt like pawns. This was no Happening, no fun, and no collaboration; it was a mirror of the world of wage slavery. The artist was viewed as a certain kind of cult leader, as a specialist in "mind-fucking." Jenny Holzer was doing street posters mimicking the syntax of inflammatory rants; Survival Research Laboratories were starting up their conspiracy theory-infused machine theatre; and the new Punk movement was reassessing the ultimate feel-bad hippie – Charles Manson, king of the mind fuckers, was a kind of negative role model. Paranoia was running deep. David's work of this period obviously mirrors this state of affairs, yet not overtly so. The works are beautiful; they seem to invite viewers to let the mind wander -to interpret as it desires ... and then to poison itself by its own free will.

I recall David's classes at Cal Arts as some of my favourites. I can't, however, say that I can recall them specifically, at all. The assignments were so open-ended that I never knew exactly what was expected of me, or even what the point of the given exercise was. That seemed part of the point of the class – to define the project as it went along, or, rather, to learn to

develop an approach that could escape definition. The crits circled on and on. Strategies were proposed and found to be too simple or obvious. You had to move on to the next level of complexity. Too confusing. Back to square one. When appropriately lost in mental gymnastics, that's when your conventionalized and slavish addiction to superego-instated laws of visuality started to dissipate. At that point there occurs the DEATH OF THE AUTHOR.

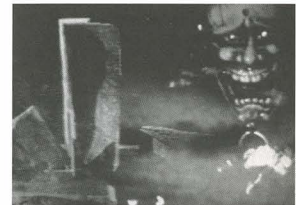
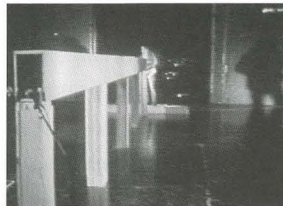
This general fear of control by others, which I mentioned earlier, is part of the reason for the rise of the "appropriation art" movement. You become the thing that you fear or desire out of choice rather than against your will. At around the time that Sherrie Levine and Richard Prince began the practice of rephotographing photographs, so did David. *Ten States in the West* (1978-79), one of David's most beautiful photographic series, consists of ten colour photographs that progress horizontally to give the impression of a wide panorama, evocative of the grand sweep of the western plains and a desert vista. The work is composed from a number of image sources, including actual landscape photographs, sparkling close-ups of indeterminate nature, elaborate fabric patterns, and sections of glossy colour magazine pages. Not collage-like at all, as the elements morph together very naturally into one spectacular sunset. It has all of the drama and effect of grand nineteenth century landscape painting, like Frederic Edwin Church at his most opulent.

Unlike the younger artists' work, where restrictions to the original source material seems a political imperative, David allows himself free reign to mix image sources of an almost psychedelic variety that Richard Prince only nods to in his variations on photographic exposure times and focus. Prince, like Askevold, is obviously drawn to the beauty of glossy magazine illustrations, yet his desires seem primarily rooted in the imagery. For David the intensely

JUMPED OUT

1984-85, 12 minutes, colour, stereo

Very little was 'set up' or pre-conceived in this tape. Each series of shots are particularly discrete unto themselves and are strung together to set up an anticipation as to what might happen next, not as narrative, but as shifting image. The overall general plan of the piece was to enter into a series of interpersonal images, the codes being either quite accessible to the viewer or less so.



coloured mirror-like surface of the page itself seems to be the attraction; how it picks up and distorts through reflection that which is in proximity to it in order to produce double exposure effects. This is keeping with the use of distortion and reflection throughout his career: the watery distortions of the photographs of *Muse Extracts* (1974), and the play with mirrors in the photographs illustrating the *Draft for a Syncretism (Notes from Lisbon)* (1972). This visual extravagance was not the norm in late seventies/early eighties art production. Compared to the younger neo-Conceptualist photographers arriving on the art scene, David's work looked positively manic. Perhaps this is why, at this time, David stopped making photographic works to concentrate primarily on video.

While in California, David, with Christina and their son Ben, lived in a small house in Venice, just a few blocks from the beachfront. Venice Boardwalk, with its assortment of gang members, weightlifters, teenage surfer runaways, hippies old and young and hordes of tourists, and the street performers they attract. Rents in Venice were still quite inexpensive and the area was part barrio, part bohemian enclave. A lot of artists lived there before the economic upswing of the eighties raised the rents. Baldessari's studio was just down the way, and was the site of many gatherings and parties where artists of varied generations mixed. I spent a lot of time at David's place, just hanging out, and the photo-shoots for *The Poltergeist* took place in his small backyard garage/studio.

We also listened to a lot of music – another shared interest between us. I was fascinated with the sound elements and musical references in David's work: the homemade instruments from *Visits* (1975-77) and *Kepler's Music of the Spheres Played by Six Snakes* (1971-73); the rhythmic nature of his short film *Knife Throw* (1969); the simplicity of the video tape *Fill* (1970), which documents the sound of aluminum foil being wrapped around a microphone until the frame is filled; recordings of the pure tones of tuning forks; his drone-like collaborations with various musicians – for example, the sound track for *Jumped Out* (1984-85); his recordings of John Todd's strange songs; and the musicality of his writing itself. In response to his writing, the Poetics, the band I was involved with, used a section of the text from *Searing Gum* (1977) as song lyrics. Later, David made a first-wave rock video with the rock band Husker Dü in 1985, a bucolic video *1/4 Moon* (1986) in which a violinist serenades animals in a barn yard, the ambient video *Two Rotating Candle Chandeliers* (1990), and *Honky Tonkin* (1986), a video which chronicles a novice learning to sing country style – a nod to David's long-standing love of country music.

After David left the Los Angeles area in 1981 (spending some time in Minneapolis, going on to Toronto, and eventually back to Halifax), he worked primarily in video, producing some of his most complex pieces. These include the fractured soap opera *How Long Have You Known Barbara* (1986-87), his closest attempt at standard narrative form; and the moving *Six Fifty* (1987-89), a "portrait" of two men that mixes real and fictive biographical material. Recently, however, David has returned to photography, at least in part, creating a new installation that combines aerial photographs of coastal harbours with video footage of "life on the surface." I'm hoping this work will provide a reassessment of his photographic work of the seventies.