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Tainted Memory: Repetition and Reconstructions in Mike Kelley's Performative Practice

Francesca Verga
University of Amsterdam

Tainted Memory: Repetition and Reconstructions in Mike Kelley's Performative Practice

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English summary *Tainted Memory: Repetition and Reconstructions in Mike Kelley's Performative Practice*

This thesis outlines and discusses the proposition that Mike Kelley's performative practice, which began in the 1970s, provided a crucial impulse for the configuration and development of new forms of memory in his artistic work and critical thinking. The ways in which we understand and inhabit memory cannot be seen as predicated on memory conceived as a data repository, but rather as an ongoing emotional and imaginative exercise, reactivating cultural stimuli in a continuing reconstruction of shared imaginaries. The formation of memory I foreground here sees it as a dynamic, action-based process rather than as something static.

The American artist Mike Kelley (1954-2012), imagined performative acts as iterative processes of rewriting and repetition that involved both objects and rituals used to stage shared imaginaries. My argument is that key aspects of the ephemerality and immateriality of Kelley's early, largely undocumented, performances, were re-arbitrated in his later artistic practice. What resulted was a new concept of memory, tainted by a co-dependency between fictional forms and the contingencies of daily life.

As to show the importance of repetition, reuse, de- and reconstruction, in Kelley's work in a broader artistic and cultural context, I will examine some hardly noticed interactions, continuities and transitions, from Kelley's earlier career to his major works: *Educational Complex* (1995) and the *Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstruction* series (2000-2012). *Tainted Memory* analyses how and on what terms this notion is articulated by examining a wide range of primary and secondary documents and sources and bringing them to bear on a constellation of material and discursive elements—props, photographs, press releases, scripts, articles and notes—along with detailed reconstructions of seminal performances using oral histories and eyewitness accounts.

Acknowledgements

This thesis has been written with the support of supervisor Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes, whose expertise was invaluable in formulating the entire study, research questions and methodology. I also would particularly like to single out my co-supervisor Rob van deer Laarse for his enduring support and advice in the field of memory studies, and John C. Welchman for being an inexhaustible source of inspiration in the work of Mike Kelley and beyond, for his attention and care. This thesis is the result of that collective dialogue. I am deeply grateful for the trust they demonstrated and their critical thinking they imparted to me. I am also deeply grateful to the Amsterdam School for Heritage, Memory and Material Culture, its leadership team and researchers.

The material discussed in this thesis has been researched and collated in different archives and museums both in Europe and in the U.S.A. Some of the most relevant sources were retrieved at the Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts, the Getty Research Center, the Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE), the Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles (MOCA), Van Abbemuseum (Eindhoven) and Stedelijk Museum (Amsterdam). While dealing with undocumented performative actions, I had been confronted with questions of ephemerality and immateriality, along with the scarce material available. Therefore, I would like give my heartfelt thanks to the numerous people, who attended the performances or had had the chance to work with Kelley, that were generously willing to meet during research trips and online discussions. I am deeply most thankful to Scott Benzel, Kathe Burkhart, Dennis Cooper, Rosamund Felsen, Kate Foley, Emi Fontana, Colin Gardner, John Miller, Stephen Prina, Jim Shaw, Joy Silverman, Mary Clare Stevens and Bruce Yonemoto. Their time and generosity have been crucial to the development of this research and on the impact oral history has had throughout the study.

Other people have helped me tremendously with their critical thinking. Here, I would like to thank especially Marc Camille Chaimowicz, Mark Leckey, Robin Rimbaud ("Scanner") and Roee Rosen. I'm further thankful for the immense input to the topic made by Jacki Apple, Invernomuto, Luca Lo Pinto, Laura Lopez Paniagua, Geneviève Loup, Marco Mazzoni, Catherine Wood, Cristina Kristal Rizzo, Sarah Russin, Elena Pirazzoli and Luca Vitone. Further thanks goes to Henderson Blumer, Robert Dirig, Karl McCool, Michiel Nijhoff, Pietro Rigolo, Hannah Sage Kay, Sarah Sherman, Lisa Tchakmakian, Amy Via for providing material, books, contacts and support. Thanks to Marija Snieckute, Vanessa Nucci, Mistale Taylor and Lotte Tavecchio, for their editing and critical review. I'm grateful to the Italian Council (9th Edition, 2020), program to promote Italian contemporary art in the world by the Directorate-General for

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Introduction

This thesis investigates issues of memory through the reading of Mike Kelley's early performances and subsequent performative work, in order to discuss the aesthetic forms developed by the artist in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, which have included new ways of treating memory in contemporary art. Mike Kelley (1954-2012) outlined a distinctive association of art with the act of remembering, reconstructing and retrieving the past and deconstructing memory, both personal and collective. Kelley's understanding of memory is arguably present already in his early performances, the first fifteen years of which are barely documented (ca.1973-1988). Yet, his dialogues with memory already then formed the basis for what is perhaps his best-known work, *Educational Complex* (1995), and they continued until possibly his most complex and layered work, *Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstruction* series. Begun in 2000 and never completed – while repeating many elements of his earlier works – in this series Kelley's oeuvre's engagement with and reconceptualization of memory fully emerges.

Kelley, born in Detroit, Michigan in 1954, moved to Los Angeles in 1976 where he attended the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts), which was known for its roots in Conceptual Art and where performance, music and writing were all interlaced. At CalArts he studied with teachers such as: Laurie Anderson, John Baldessari, Douglas Huebler, and other artists such as John Miller, Tony Oursler, Lari Pittman, Stephen Prina, Jim Shaw, Mitchell Syrop, and Christopher Williams. During his career, he collaborated with artists such as Cameron Jamie, Paul McCarthy, Oursler, Anita Pace, Prina, Scanner, Mike Smith, Sonic Youth, and Bruce and Norman Yonemoto. He was one of the artists who caught the public's attention and managed to spread his influence throughout exhibitions and international retrospectives in the United States and Europe, at numerous public and private collections. With his use of West Coast underground,

counter-culture and the American folk forms, he commanded a level of influence (although hard to mimic) not accorded to many other artists, producing innovative work in almost every form and medium: installations, large-scale drawings and paintings, video, sculptures, music, photography, and most importantly in his performances.

Before further contextualising Kelley's work, I would first like to stress the importance of memory in his artistic work. As to unravel meanings and methods of his performances my approach will therefore be inspired both by art and memory studies. During the 20th century, history and memory were the subject of intense debate in the fields of art and philosophy as well as in science. Whereas history was generally kept for fact-based discipline of truth-finding, this changed since the 1970s and 1980s – during Kelley's early works.[1] In the 1990s, English historian Keith Jenkins claimed that all history should be seen as narrative and story-making.[2] Already Walter Benjamin rejected the idea of an officially recognized history, and it may be assumed then that history exists in different forms and versions, related to the context in which they were produced.[3] As argued by American scholar David Lowenthal, modernity led to a continuous questioning of the past, which never remains stable and, at the same time, is constantly selecting and reconstructed for those (elites, institutions, nations) using the past for present interests.[4] *The Past Is a Foreign Country*,

[1] Hayden V. White, *Metahistory: the historical imagination in nineteenth-century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).
[2] Keith Jenkins, *Rethinking History* (1991; reis. London and New York: Routledge Classic, 2003), 8.
[3] See: Walter Benjamin, *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, 1942. English translation: English translation is in:
Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (Fontana/ Collins, 1973), 255-266.
See also:
Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1995);
Astrid Erll, *Memory in culture* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011);
Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory: rethinking the French past*, ed. Lawrnce D. Kritzman, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996-98).
[4] David Lowenthal*, The Past is a Foreign Country*. Revisited (1985; reis. Cambridge UP, 2015), pp. 147 – 205; pp. 289-610.
For this paragraph, I rely on suggestions put forward by Rob van der Laarse. I thank him for generously sharing his thoughts on historical and memory studies.

originally published by Lowenthal in 1985 and revisited three decades later, is a picture of the past perpetually reshaped by the needs and demands of the present by modern Western cultures.[5] Such relativist notions of history developed during the late 20th century in parallel and in dialogue with a rising criticism of Western imperialism and cultural racism, like in Edward Said's influential work *Orientalism* (1978) which represented this paradigm shift from a Gramscian and Foucauldian perspective as a deeply rooted hegemonic discourse on the colonial and diasporic past.[6]

Shifts between the past as the paradigm of memory, from History to histories,[7] from memory to memories, became central to the view of postmodernism as the "death of centres" and the questioning of master narratives.[8] Simultaneously, shifts in the conceptions of history in societies have pervaded the collective path but also the conceived personal memory, from an objective reconstruction of the past to a new theoretical model. Personal memory recovery in psychotherapy was found to be potentially misleading or inaccurate, especially in the 1980's in America.[9] If, on one side, some psychotherapists claimed that repressed memories could, in fact, be recalled using particular therapies, on the other side recovered memory therapy found to be inappropriate, generating sometimes what was called a 'false memory,' when one person remember events that never occurred. This

[5] Ibid.
[6] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978).
[7] As Édouard Glissant said: "History (with a capital H) ends where the histories of those peoples once reputed to be without history come together. History is a highly functional fantasy of the West, originating at precisely that time when it alone 'made' the history of the world" in: Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. J. Michael Dash (1989; reis. 1996, Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, Caraf Books), 64.
[8] An expression frequently used by Jean-Francois Lyotard. Cited in: Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity* (London and New York: Verso, 1998), 24–27.
This paragraph has been used as a general outline of my research in the publication: Francesca Verga, "Working With Images: Documentary Photography in the Oeuvres of Mike Kelley and W.G. Sebald" in *Memory, Word and Image. W.G. Sebald's Artistic Legacies* (Amsterdam University Press, to be published in 2022).
[9] Repressed memories are memories from traumatic events that are stored in the unconscious mind and blocked from a recall. The term "Repressed Memory" was present in the essay by Sigmund Freud, *Zur Ätiologie der Hysterie*, 1896 ("On the etiology of hysteria") on the origins of hysteria and obsessional attitudes, and the formation of repressed memory for cases of child abuse.

divergent thinking was immersed into a hysteria about recovered memories and connected to paranoid conspiracy theories, in which Kelley was interested to.[10] That hysteria surrounded the American milieu in the 1980s, as manifested in court cases such as the McMartin Preschool scandal, referring to a day care sexual abuse case that was reported in the media in 1983 and resulted in no final convictions ten years later. Later, the term 'False Memory Syndrome' (FMS) was defined in the 1990s by the False Memory Syndrome Foundation (FMSF) and connected to recovered memories of child abuse. FMS is a contested notion in itself, as his American founder Peter J. Freyd was investigated himself for child abuse recovered with therapy. Rather than linking repressed memories to an investigation of truth-finding (if memories recovered by psychotherapy happened or not is not the aim of this research), it is instead the paroxysmal void left from those memories and the possibilities of reconstruction for poetic ends, which interested Kelley. Therefore, it is not truth-finding that will be especially considered in the context of repressed memory syndrome, but the narrative and story-making around this phenomenon while analysing Kelley's own practice.

At this point, I need to define the concepts of personal and collective memory, as they will be dealt with in this thesis through Kelley's work, beginning with distinguishing memory from recollections. Recollections are what is recalled in the past (i.e. a single event or experience or a series of events and experiences), which have been stored in the consciousness and are recalled to the mind by memory. If personal memory can be defined as the memory of episodes in one's own life, collective memory is a much more stratified term, that implies shared knowledge and information by a social group which may generate new memorial communities.[11] For Jay Winter

[10] Elizabeth Loftus and Katherine Ketcham, *The Myth of Repressed Memory: False Memories and Allegations of Sexual buse* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994). See also: Kathryn Lyon, *Witch Hunt: A True Story of Social Hysteria and Abused Justice* (New York: Avon Books, 1998).

[11] Rob Van der Laarse, "Beyond Auschwitz? Europe's Terrorscapes in the Age of Postmemory" in *Memory and Postwar Memorials. Confronting the Violence of the Past*, eds. Marc Silberman and Florence Vatan (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013);

(like Henri Bergson) collective memories are the sum of individual memories (memories are personal and cannot be shared).[12] Therefore, collective memory is essentially constructed by individuals. Opposite to a constructivist notion of collective memory (Halbwachs' conception of collective memory) that sees individual memory not treated as a single psychological function of an individual, but formed through social frames.[13] The fundamental thesis of Halbwachs is that to remember means to actualise the memories of a group, and collective memory is the framework that allows individual memories to function. However, a precise distinction and clear separation between personal and collective memory is not appropriate. Recollections, especially when talking about trauma, are a collective experience and both memories (personal and collective) seem to influence each other. Nor exists a precise distinction of past and present when there is a recollection. Memory actively reproduces past experiences in the mind and relates them to the present. The past is therefore not stored as an unconscious state of the psyche, but rather collectively reconstructed in the present.[14] The memory that I am going to consider in this thesis is basically such a reconstruction of the past as a function of the present.

It is interesting to note how such concept went back to Saint Augustine (Tagaste, 354-430), the bishop of Hippo Regius (the ancient name of the modern city of Annaba, Algeria). Little of his African background survived the memory of his crucial role in the canonisation of Roman-Europe's Christian bible and early medieval culture. But the Saint contributed to form a view to modern and postmodern theories of

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Noga Stiassny, "'Travelling Landscapes' and the Potential of Artscapes" in *Memory Studies*, (October 2021). https://doi.org/10.1177/17506980211045599;
Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London, England: Verso Books, 2016);
Kurt W. Forster "Aby Warburg's History of Art: Collective Memory and the Social Mediation of Images." Daedalus 105, no. 1 (1976): 169–76. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20024391;
Henry L. Roediger and Magdalena Abel, "Collective memory: a new arena of cognitive study," in *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, Vol. 19, July 2015, 359-361.

[12] Jay Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War Between Historical Memory and History In The Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

[13] Maurice Halbwachs, *Les Cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1925).

[14] Ibid.

representations that certainly have more to do with a non-Eurocentric and non-linear understanding of the three dimensions of time: past, present and future.[15] His narrative made no distinction between present and past, and perhaps the most beautiful pages on the absence of it were written in his great reflections on memory in the *Confessioni*:

> Perhaps it might be said rightly that there are three times: a time present of things past; a time present of things present; and a time present of things future. For these three do coexist somehow in the soul, for otherwise I could not see them. The time present of things past is memory; the time present of things present is direct experience; the time present of things future is expectation.[16]

It follows that, what is at stake here, when we talk about memory, is not only the past, but what the past brings with itself, along with its imaginative potential. The present can influence our recollection of the past and lead to a contamination with the collective cultures we belong to: from media to myths, from mass culture to vernacular and oral history, including what is unsaid from a (sub)culture, what is forgotten or what is repressed.

Looking at memory from this perspective, I will place several references throughout the thesis to movements and people who, in parallel to Kelley, read these two main characteristics of memory: its imaginative potential and contamination of past-present and present-past. For example, notions such as Myth-Science and Afrofuturism – terms related to science fiction and African diaspora and used already in the 1970s from African American theorists, writers and artists – are particularly relevant in producing alternative modes of living, re-discussing the past and imagine new narratives (see chapter three). Among the various sociological, historical and artistic introductions to memory that revisit traditional notions of history, of past and present, of personal and collective memory,

[15] Paul Ricœur, *Memory, history, forgetting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).
[16] St. Augustine, *The Confessions*, XI, 20, 26 (Paris, France: Bibliothèque de La Pléiade, 1998). English version available online: http://www.ourladyswarriors.org/saints/augcon10.htm

from Myth-Science to Afrofuturism, from parafiction to the politics of fictioning, I found Kelley's introduction to memory in his performances since the 1970s illuminating, as well as poetic.

In the context of this thesis, it is this "tainted memory" that gains significance; 'taint' meaning not as something that becomes impure, but as a physical or moral conduct modifying traditional or individual memory. "Tainted memory" are the words written on a white sheet by Kelley and featured in his 1980 performance *The Parasite Lily*. The artist used that word in the script several times, to describe the character's instability along with the memory of the viewer. I wanted to single out this word, as we will see it running through the whole thesis, because it suggests how memory is in constant change and its linear progression questioned. I will analyse such change, as treated in Kelley's work, and how it relates to present social and cultural contexts. Conceiving memory this way as a flow brings us closer to movement (and therefore to a performative act) than to a testimony of memory as durable and reproducing itself as always the same (often, erroneously, the definition of a monument).[17] Memory as a flow can be built and reconstructed, hence the interest in this thesis to Kelley's many, though hardly documented performances, as well as to the phenomena of performative act as a temporary movement of subject and body in the space.

I will, therefore, first analyse fifteen years of Kelley's ephemeral performative practices, while inscribing it in the context of American performance art of the 1970s and 1980s. I will consider some of the subsequent works that deal with performativity as artistic practice in its relation to memory. The term "performance" derived from the 16th century Middle French term *parfournir* (which literally means "to complete" "to

[17] In recent artistic and historiographical studies, the monument is increasingly moving away from being something static towards the idea of movement that is much closer to politics of movement (or kinopolitics) theorized by the philosopher Thomas Nail. For more information on the relation between monument and performance in the twentieth century in Europe see: Mechtild Widrich, *Performative Monuments: The Rematerialisation of Public Art* (Manchester: Manchester Univ Pr, 2014).

carry out," "to accomplish").[18] To perform means to produce something, to bring something to completion, or to execute a drama or a project. As the anthropologist Victor Turner suggested in *From Ritual to Theatre* (1982), the concept of performance can be used to penetrate potentially fertile zones of rewriting cultural codes and new paradigms and hence to bring social transformation itself.[19] Through the staging of our body-mind and through performance, it is possible to make a critical reflection on certain aspects of society. Turner's reflections are strongly influenced by Richard Schechner's theoretical and documentary trajectory that juxtaposes and verifies forms of ritual with the experience of the stage. In addition, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's in *Destination Culture* (1988) talked about the performativity of objects and people as conveying messages by the fact of existence or being exhibited.[20] In this respect, Paul Connerton in *How Societies Remember* (1989) asserted that social memory (collective memory of the groups) is legitimated by bodily practices and ritual ceremonies.[21] Those demonstrations bring memory towards what is socially habitual. As he put it, "commemorative ceremonies prove to be commemorative only in so far as they are performative; performativity cannot be thought without a concept of habit; and habit cannot be thought without a notion of bodily automatisms."[22]

In this research, the theory and performance practice, which is essentially based on the experimental factor and on learning by performing, on learning by "acting out", takes on new meaning. Judith Butler's gender performance theory is of inspiration here, as the feminist philosopher used the term performativity to describe the social construction of the

[18] Victor W. Turner, *From ritual to theatre: the human seriousness of play* (1982; reis. New York: PAJ., 2012), 13.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination culture: tourism, museums, and heritage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).
[21] Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge UP, 1989).
[22] Ibid.

individual.[23] She affirmed that there is no existence in us without performing our subject constantly in interaction with our environment. Thus for Butler the subject becomes performative and it does so through the act of repetition.[24] What provides memory to the ephemeral event, is indeed performative repetition. In the context of my research such a mnemonic process will center around a repetition of construction and deconstruction which may turn every performance into a re-enactment of memory.

What is of interest here is the way memory, through the forms of repetition, rewriting and reconstructions, can inform specific works of Kelley, and vice versa. How did Kelley's performative acts deal with memory and how does that pervade in his later major works on memory? I will analyse how the artist approached memory and I will follow different analytical approaches narrated in this thesis that seem to infuse the mnemonic discourse with a new light.

One narrative strand deals with repetition in Kelley's performance scripts, his mode of delivery and intonation, as well as in gestures, movements and dance. How does the reconstruction of memory unfold in his performative work and how did he use it to this end; does it form part of repetition and distortion of memory? How is repetition applied in language and movements and how is the audience's memory implied in this delivery?

A second narrative concerns the sites of memory and cubbyholes as used by the artist (from small pockets to closets, corners, boxes, to reflections on homes and caves). In which way did he encounter the educational and institutional structures in his architectural installation, *Educational Complex* (1995), where he recreated remembered spaces and left blanks in place of those he could not remember?

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[23] See: Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 49/1 (December 1988), 519-531.

[24] For more, see: Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter. On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Judith Butler, *Gender trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity* (1990; reis. London, England: Routledge, 2006).

A third narrative considers the reconstruction of memory and its reconsiderations departing from appropriation of images and documentary photography. How is memory re-imagined in *Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstruction* work through the addition of fictions or fantasies, combined within art historical icons and contemporary popular culture, instead of being merely recalled? What are these agents of transformation that act on oblivion and blankness, and in which way do fresh narratives unfold within these sites? With these questions intermingled with scholarly and theoretical positions from memory studies, photography, dance and movement, philosophy, sociology and art history and theory, the aim of this research is to outline memory in relation to Kelley's work departing from the performative acts.

A number of contemporary artists have made historical texts and documents central to their practice in ways that criticize and subvert the traditional archive and collection.[25] Visual artists have been representing, re-enacting repressed histories and narratives, approaching art as an exercise of memory.[26] Hence, memory has been used by artists as a tool for collective remembering, recovery in psychotherapy, questioning

[25] This is analysed by Hal Foster in *Archival Impulse*, which announces a new tendency of the artist serving as an archivist; by Jacques Derrida (*The Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*) and by Okwui Enwezor (*Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*). Rosalind Krauss addressed the topic of memory in one of her recent books, *Under Blue Cup* (2011), with a different approach in which she developed a relation between memory and a specific notion of aesthetic 'medium', a post-medium that acts as a support. Having had an aneurysm that washed away part of her memories, Krauss reflects on the cultural memory's mediation and on the medium as a form of remembering, a form that extended its own life.

[26] According to Jean Gibbons, the "autobiographic memory" is emblematic in the work of Louise Bourgeois on the reconstruction of the present-past and Tracey Emin's mix with pop culture, and memory in the form of index and traces is represented by Nan Goldin's *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* as forms documentation and reportage. The author also pays attention to history as a form of documentation from Gustave Courbet's works to Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* (1979), and to what she terms "Post-memory" in the work of Christian Boltanski (1944) and in memorial sites. See for example: Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz, *Harburg Monument against Fascism, War and Violence* (1986); Christian Boltanski, The *Missing House* (1990); Thomas Hirschhorn*, Gramsci Monument* (2013); Kara Walker, *A Subtlety* (2014); Dahn Vo, *We are the people* (2011-2013).
Joan Gibbons, *Contemporary art and memory: images of recollection and remembrance* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007).

temporality, or reassembling of history. These thematic approaches of memory in contemporary art are discussed in Jean Gibbons' *Contemporary art and memory: Images of Recollections and Remembrance*, which assembles different approaches of contemporary art on the topic of memory.[27] The interdisciplinary orientation of this thesis allows me to focus on practices across continents as a way of expanding the parameters of geographic discussion. Despite the various possibilities relating memory to visual art cannot be discussed in analytical detail here, the enactments and re-enactments of memories in art criticism and theory will be particularly important for this thesis. Over the course of the chapters the work of some artists will be mentioned to contextualise the matter of memory and reconstruction in other practices for comparison, such as the case with the French artist Pierre Huyghe.

To position Kelley in relation to memory, it is worth considering that his practice and research have been objects of analysis from different perspectives, in art criticism and more recently in the academic world. However, theories of memory which implies repetition, rewriting and reconstructions, have not usually been employed in the critique or interpretations of Kelley's work, especially in the early work produced in the first 20 years. Certainly, his work has been analysed concerning reflections on American popular culture and other mass culture experiences, including his investigations on counter-culture and relations between high and low culture, trying to prevail aesthetic conventions. Interpretations of his work have so far more forcefully highlighted topics such as religion, youthful rebellion, sexuality, the uncanny and relations to surrealism, repressed memory, post-punk politics. They have also been connected with the Abject Art movement, with references to personal, folk, and collective histories, and more in general questioning modernist aesthetic practice and theory and the reception of his work. Concerning forms of memory, the topic was

[27] Joan Gibbons, *Contemporary art and memory: images of recollection and remembrance* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007).

mainly addressed in relation to American popular culture and the 'repressed memory syndrome', debated in the late 1980s as a new American preoccupation, along with reflections on conspiracy theories, nostalgia and trauma, especially in relation to personal memory recovery for his work *Educational Complex* (1995). This analysis is present in several critical texts and in Kelley's own publications and interviews, in which the artist explained the influence of the pop psychological theory on his own experience and reception of artworks.[28] With this thesis I want to reconsider some assumptions that consider Kelley interested in memory only from the mid-nineties onwards, seeing this "shift" after the artist's reacted to the public misperception in the interpretation of his work. In the 1980s, his sculptural work made of stuffed animals was interpreted as a trace of abuse (as if Kelley himself was victim of a trauma) and the viewer started to psychoanalyse it, actions that brought Kelley to reflect on the nature and role of his work.[29] I am trying to (re)read his artistic practice by focusing on the first twenty years of performances, thus reading some of his subsequent works in the light of memory – and 'tainted memory' especially.

The impact of memory in Kelley's research from these perspectives and its initial developments in performances stand in need of a thorough reassessment. Furthermore, several texts and references provide relevant support material for this research from different angles, especially texts written by the artist himself and interviews that constitute a great source of

[28] See for example: "Mike Kelley" interviewed by Glenn O'Brien, *Interview Magazine,* 28 November 2008; "Missing Time: works on Paper 1974 – 1976, reconsidered" in *Mike Kelley: Minor Histories. Statements, Conversations, Proposals*, ed. John C. Welchman (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2004), 60-67; "Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstruction #1 (A Domestic Scene) (2000)" in *Mike Kelley: Minor Histories. Statements, Conversations, Proposals*, ed. John C. Welchman (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2004), 238.
See also as examples: David Hopkins, 'Dark Toys. Surrealism and the Culture of Childhood' (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 253-287; Anthony Vidler, 'Warped Space' (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2000), 159-71;
Ben Davis, 'How Art History Can Help Explain the Stunning Rise of Conspiracy Theories That Is Defining Our Time', on: news.artnet.com, 20 May 2021.
[29] "Mike Kelley" interviewed by Glenn O'Brien, *Interview Magazine,* 28 November 2008; "Missing Time: works on Paper 1974 – 1976, reconsidered" in *Mike Kelley: Minor Histories. Statements, Conversations, Proposals*, ed. John C. Welchman (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2004), 60-67.

information on the subject matter and that will be disclosed in each of the chapters.[30] Artist John Miller recently published a monograph on *Educational Complex,* delineating, as we will see in the second chapter, a clear position on the institutional space and how it forms memory.[31] In *Institutional Critique and After*, John C. Welchman, in a conversation with the artist contributed to reflecting on the sites of memory that insert themselves into the wider topic of the institutional structure.[32] Welchman has written an engaging essay on ideas and experiences of memory in Mike Kelley's works, in which he outlines some questions on the physical and conceptual reorganization of memory. [33] Other articles and monographic texts refer to the topic of memory, as well as dissertations in the academic world; see for example the thesis of Laura López Paniagua that presented Kelley's oeuvre as a stance in materialist aesthetics and memory illusions.[34] However, a complete overview and research on Kelley's relation to memory, especially with a focus on his first fifteen years of practice, as inserted in an interdisciplinary context, has not yet been achieved, and questions around repetition, rewriting and reconstructions remained open to discussion.

By analysing memory in relation to Kelley's work from a social-constructivist approach, an art historical approach will be combined with other disciplinary perspectives, discourses, and scholars. Contemporary art crosses over to diverse areas of knowledge: social, cultural, historical, philosophical and economic concerns need to be taken into account.

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[30] See for example: Mike Kelley, Diedrich Diederichsen and Howard Singerman, *Educational Complex Onwards 1995-2008,* ed. Anne Pontegnie (Zurich: Jrp Ringier Kunstverlag Ag, 2008); "Missing Space/Time: A Conversation with Mike Kelley, Kim Colin, and Mark Skiles" (1995), in *Mike Kelley: Minor Histories: Statements, Conversations, Proposals*, ed. John C. Welchman (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2004).

[31] John Miller, *Mike Kelley: Educational Complex* (London: Afterall Books, 2015).

[32] John C. Welchman, *Institutional Critique and after* (Zurich: Jrp Ringier Kunstverlag Ag, 2006).

[33] John C. Welchman, "Exacting the 'Half Part of Oblivion': Partial Recall, Memorial Attrition, Blanks, and Projection in the Work of Mike Kelley (Not Forgetting Walter Benjamin)" in *Erasure: The Spectre of Cultural Memory*, ed. Brad Buckley and John Conomos, (London: Libri, 2014), 230-238.

[34] Laura López Paniagua, *Mike Kelley: Materialist Aesthetics and Memory Illusions* (Milan: Mousse Publishing, 2020).

Therefore, it is necessary to position research not only in relation to memory in visual art, but also to other fields of memory studies. Also historical has to be taken into account in order to better understand the context in which Kelley's work develops. In addition to art historical and memory studies, also reception theory, psychology, spatial analysis, politics of fictioning, Afrofuturism, Myth-Science and parafiction. Notions of appropriation and *détournement* will be particularly relevant as they played a significant role in the history of the arts which deals with existing material and sources for making the work, an art that is circumventing official histories trying to (re)read their functions. Concerns and examples are raised, while analysing memory, by a group of scholars working in disciplines outside art history, such as philosophy, psychoanalysis and science.[35]

The research structure follows the engagement of Kelley with issues of memory through three main bodies of artworks in a more or less chronological order. The structure gives special attention to the first years of Kelley's practice: in between 1970s and 1980s when the artist was living in Los Angeles, studying at CalArts and relating with performative practices. In those years, Kelley developed an outstandingly complex set of performances that, despite the difficulty in the retrieval of documents, constitute a milestone and reveal his approach on memory. It was part of a process begun in the 1970s, when he started to perform, and in the second half of 1980 changed his medium in documenting and recreating these actions in experimental video works and installations related with performance and contemporary dance. Therefore, performativity will continue as a line of investigation in all the sections of the thesis.

[35] Some of the more influential scholars to whose work I will refer include the philosopher Gaston Bachelard (especially *The Poetics of Space*, 1957, and spatial analysis); Sigmund Freud; Frances Yates (her *The Art of Memory*), Giorgio Agamben; Octavia E. Butler; Sun Ra (*Space is the Place*); Sylvia Plath, and Sebald (his use of photography in *Austerlitz*). The spatial memories explained by Bachelard are fragmentary gaps, for which their essence could be detect in Mike Kelley's *Educational Complex* (1995). In Chapter two there will be a confrontation between Kelley's thoughts on sites of memory and Gaston Bachelard's visions on the topic, knowing that the artist had read the books by the philosopher.

The first chapter will disclose the material concluded about some of the performative acts and video related pieces, such as: *The Futurist Ballet* (1973), *The Pole Dance* (1977), *Indianana* (1978), *The Parasite Lily* (1980), *Meditation on a Can of Vernors* (1981), *Confusion* (1982), *The Banana Man* (1983), *Plato's Cave, Rothko's Chapel, Lincoln's profile* (1985-86), *Pansy Metal Clovered Hoof* (1989) and *Beat of The Traps* (1992). In doing so, particular attention will be given to the working-class American context and the cultural and performative milieu in which Kelley grows up. Memory presented in Kelley's first performances will be discussed mainly relating to the concept of repetition and developing through different elements: repetition of words and concepts; repetition of gestures and movements; spatial memories and reconstructions; childhood memories and revision. Here particular attention will be given to the objects, their use and role as repositories. The thesis will then continue in the analysis of two specific groups of artworks important for their different, but nevertheless consequential, approach on memory: *Educational Complex* (1995) and the *Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstruction* series (2000-2012).

The second chapter will follow a trajectory that refers to the actual spaces and cubbyholes and it questions how they are used by Kelley: smaller domestic spaces, basements, caves, cupboards, drawers, pockets and similar. "Sites of memory" – the memory is intended locatively both as practices of psychoanalytic engagement and self-knowledge and also as shared active pools in politics and culture – have, in Kelley's work, provided a common shape for memory, but alongside they are thought as devices and homes for the unremembered, forgotten and deformative recollection. Both the artist's memory traces and the erasure of memory of his environments led Kelley in developing a narrative that encourages and questions individual remembering of historical events, or, as Gaston Bachelard asked: "Did they ever exist? Something unreal seeps into the reality of the recollections

(…)."[36] I will analyse and reflect on how Kelley, according to Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* used these spaces as "homeland" of the uncanny mysterious aspect of memory as subjected both to degradation and to re-construction. Kelley's central work in my second chapter will be *Educational Complex* (1995), maybe one of the best implementations of the idea of loci for tracing repressed memories, in which we will see how Kelley directed us from personal to collective and social memory. By looking at a set of attributes and foundations of historical mnemotechnics and recurring motifs already present in his performative works (such as repetition) it is my aim to provide an account of the way spatial memory are unfolded in his work from the smallest domestic spaces (pockets, drawers, wardrobes and chests) to reflections on complete inner houses and school buildings, with particular attention to the more hidden spaces of caves and sub-basements.

The third chapter will analyse the complex and layered work *Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstruction* (EAPR), based on photographs from high-school yearbooks. I will see how, in a way similar to W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* (2001), Kelley started to develop a pseudo-narrative mnemonic flow from decontextualised images. Closely related to the "re-photography" practice (and appropriation) context in 1980s-1990s, it shows a shift from a conception of memory dealing with recollection and engagement with the past towards a view of memory that has to do more with projections into the future. Through these works, Kelley elaborated on an approach of recalling the declensions of space, the central model for shaping memory, while using space for a materialisation of repressed or 'forgotten memories', the lost and the found, traces, hints and remainders orchestrated by projective fictions.[37] Departing from American 1960s counterculture, Myth Science, Fabulation, and dance practices, infused with

[36] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (1958; reis., Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 57-59.

[37] John C. Welchman, "Exacting the 'Half Part of Oblivion': Partial Recall, Memorial Attrition, Blanks, and Projection in the Work of Mike Kelley (Not Forgetting Walter Benjamin)", in *Erasure: The Spectre of Cultural Memory*, eds. Brad Buckley and John Conomos (London: Libri, 2015).

a sense of movement and repetition, I will see in which way Kelley dealt with retrieving memory, reconstructed fantasies, projections and speculations. In *EAPR* and elsewhere it will disclose the fluid and malleable impressions of what constitutes memory (in which all beliefs are to some extent contaminated with fictionalisation), and flows through the artist's visual, filmic, sonic, textual and sculptural works in an unusual and uncanny manner. This thesis will let Mike Kelley emerge as an artist who in his mnemonic practices and vision has theorised and shown in unique ways a deep artistic understanding and conceptualisation of memory.