

The Body Politic

For over three decades Mary Kelly has fused aesthetics, politics, psychoanalysis and radical formalism. She talked to Ian White about her unique approach to making art and her work for documenta 12

Since the 1970s American artist Mary Kelly has developed an installation-based practice that combines the personal and the political, aesthetics with psychoanalytic enquiry and a radical formalism with an equally radical expression of subjectivity. Her 1976 exhibition of the first three parts of Post-Partum Document (1973-9) at the ICA in London, which included her son's stained nappy liners, scandalized the tabloid press but was in fact more of a challenge to the Conceptual art establishment. It is a seminal work in which the various strategies of duration, storytelling and combination of text and object not only describe a very particular kind of viewing experience but also reflect the collaborative, experimental film and art projects that precede it and project forwards into subsequent works. Profoundly affected by her engagement with teaching (Kelly is currently Professor of Art and Critical Theory at UCLA), her recent work Love Songs, will be included in documenta 12.

Ian White Your work takes the form of large-scale narrative installations that you often describe in cinematic terms. What first inspired you to get involved with filmmaking?

Mary Kelly I originally trained as a painter. I studied in Florence with protégés of Giorgio Morandi and learned traditional techniques like fresco. But I was more interested in contemporary work so I moved to London in 1968, to study at St. Martin's School of Art. I remember going to see Othon (1971) at the National Film Theatre. When I saw the way the directors Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub ran the whole reel on that one shot going into Rome, I thought this was absolutely what I wanted to do, not just with film, but also with installation as a series of stills. It was an epiphany! My first experience of working on a film was making Nightcleaners (1970-5) as part of the Berwick Street Film Collective.

About this article

Published on 05/05/07

By *Ian White*



[Back to the main site](#)

IW How did you find the process of collective filmmaking?

MK Working collectively is a bit like being part of a dysfunctional family! I was the only woman in the collective. I was recruited because I was involved in the Women's Movement and I was an artist. They had decided to make the film and I was already working on the night cleaners' campaign for unionization. My role was partly one of 'consciousness raising' and I remember some heated arguments with Marc Karlin. He was a brilliant filmmaker and a formative influence within the collective, but when it came to some of the issues concerned with women's liberation, it often felt as though things could come to blows at any moment. The strength of *Nightcleaners*, I think, is the way it represents the input of the Women's Movement as well as the Trade Unions and the night cleaners themselves as three parallel, but interconnected, discourses.

IW As well as being involved in the Women's Movement, you were also one of the founders of the Artists' Union: a movement that has been really under-documented.

MK That was an incredible moment historically for solidarity, although, interestingly, across all the social movements – women, anti-war, and civil rights – the issue of class remained. In the Artists' Union, we talked about being 'workers', which was completely off-the-wall in many ways, but it promoted an ambitious project to make cultural labour part of the wider demand for unionization at that time.

IW At what point did you feel you wanted to move away from film and work mainly in an exhibition context?

MK As early as 1976 – the year that I exhibited the first three sections of *Post-Partum Document* (1973–9) at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London – although I don't know if you could ever say I moved away from film completely. After *Nightcleaners*, I collaborated on *Women and Work: A Document on the Division of Labour in Industry* (1975) with Margaret Harrison and Kay Hunt from the Women's Workshop at the Artists' Union. Both of these projects influenced the development of *Post-Partum Document*, which I had begun working on in 1973 – the year my son was born – in a very intuitive way. Initially, *Post-Partum Document* was intended as a sociological study of the mother-child relationship. Then I became aware that it needed something else – to do with psychic investment in that relationship – so that it wasn't just about domestic labour. When the writer/filmmaker Peter Wollen first saw *Post-Partum Document*, he described it as diegetic. Although

it does resemble much serial Conceptual work, there is a narrative element, unformed in the initial sections, but more evident as the work progresses. In another way, though, it's what I would call a narrativization of space: you walk around it and encounter objects intimately in real time. That spatial element is so important to me. The long opening shot in *Othon* acted as a reference for the installation. It concerned a different idea of duration, not literal documentation as most Conceptual artists regarded it, but one that involved a take on psychological time.

IW Did you feel dissatisfied by the cinema auditorium as a vehicle for exhibiting your work?

MK Yes, although it's easier to make these observations with hindsight! I was still in love with film because I was caught up in a particular moment when it was viewed as the most progressive medium and I was trying to do activist work. But I also really wanted to do something with still images and I thought there was so much potential in installation; a kind of temporal experience that could be more self-reflexive. My problem with cinema, I mean the conventions of spectatorship, is that you have to watch a film from beginning to end, that you don't have a chance to stop and rewind. Also, over the years, cinema has increasingly become the dominant institution of our time, and the museums that we used to complain about in the 1970s have become sanctuaries for experimental work; the only thing left that's not completely virtual. It's one of those rare instances where the outmoded has some redemptive value. It was absolutely clear to me that *Post-Partum Document* was not going to be a film. It needed material things that I could frame, both literally and metaphorically, as objects. The diagrams were just as emotional as the memorabilia and, as time went on, I became increasingly convinced that installation was the only way to relay this. At the time we were saturated with images of women and I was trying to figure out how you could give a voice to that subject position without a figurative referent. The solution seemed to be that more should become contingent on the viewer, on how people moved around the space and became surrogates for the absent body in the work. I'd take that even further now and say that the art work doesn't exist without the viewer. Giorgio Agamben has spoken about the ethical position as one where you're neither producing something nor enacting it. I think this is what happens as a spectator, if you can really let yourself be open to that possibility, you complete the work by anticipating rather than judging or deciphering it.

IW Post-Partum Document is an epic piece. How conscious a decision was it to make it so physically massive? Was its size a provo-cation to institutions?

MK Not really. Its size was inherent to the process of my enquiry and I genuinely didn't know when it was going to end. It was informed by psychoanalysis – enquiry based on free association. Each part of the work took about two years to figure out. Post-Partum Document ended up having six parts, which I completed over six years. I was exploring my relationship with my son not only as a way of interrogating subjectivity and sexuality in more universal terms, but also, personally, and rather obsessively, as a means of 'working through'. I only realised I should stop when he wrote his name. At that point, in a way, he'd become the author. Actually, I started out thinking of it as an even bigger project that included the film Antepartum (1973), the only work to pre-date Post-Partum Document. It was recently shown in 'Full House' (2006), a large-scale exhibition of Minimal and Conceptual work at the Whitney Museum of American Art. In that context you could understand, historically, what I was trying to do. The film is just one very long take of my pregnant abdomen, up close, in black and white, filling the whole screen for 90 seconds. You can see a little bit of movement, and then my hand passes over it – that's all there is in the loop. But when it's enlarged to the size of a 16mm projection and shown alongside works by Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Sol LeWitt and others, you see an apparently minimal form, but there's also this corporeality, the mess of real life. I did this consciously – to cause trouble!

IW I was trying to think around how Post-Partum Document might function politically, and I kept coming back to questions of audience. Do you work with a particular viewer in mind?

MK In the early 1970s, when I was working on Post-Partum Document, I felt I was addressing specific debates in the Women's Movement, both internationally and locally. Of course, some of the women in our local group were also my closest friends – we lived in a commune, and they were party to everything I was doing: I remember reading them all the narratives in Corpus – the first part of my extended project Interim (1984–90) – because I felt we were trying to work something out together. I still feel that to this day. I think who you desire to speak to at an unconscious level is very significant, because if your work no longer has any collective imaginary, then that's the end of public art.

IW Given all your activist work and involvement with the

Artists' Union, how you feel about the fact that you make art works which are sold commercially?

MK Most of my work is in public collections. I don't have anything to say about the market – I just ignore it.

IW I've always been fascinated by your relationship to materials. Interim is the work where material really comes to the fore. The physical forms that you had been working with became much more resolved; the notion of the art work as a monument or tomb became more clearly visualized than in Post-Partum Document, where the memorialization was a more delicate affair.

MK Well, tomb sounds a bit bleak, but it's interesting that you describe Interim as a monument. At the time, my idea was to make a work that evoked the physical experience of the public sphere: I didn't want to repeat the intimacy of Post-Partum Document. I also wanted it to have humour. Laura Mulvey and I had talked a lot about how we had been accused of destroying pleasure, so the use of that kind of narrative together with the scale was a way of making it self-consciously more entertaining. And, as you say, the change in the materials – the use of metal and glass, which are cold, hard and reflective, to create different types of surfaces, as well as referencing public spaces, such as banks and bus shelters _ all of this helps reinforce the narratives. I wasn't interested in the soft, sewn-object femininity that was often associated with work informed by Feminism in the 1980s.

IW I understand you're presently working on a new version of your 2005 project, Love Songs, for documenta 12.

MK The impetus for Love Songs came from my students. I noticed that they were pre-occupied with that pivotal moment we refer to as 'the events of '68'. Then I realised that they were born around that time, so their fascination was partly to do with figuring out where they came from: what I like to call the 'political primal scene'. On one level, Love Songs is about the appearance of the past in the present, this generation imagining what they missed or what we were trying to achieve: on another, it's about my identification with them: which is to say, it's driven as much by narcissism as altruism on both sides. I found it compelling to hear them describe events that had happened before they were born: to realize how actions, gestures and even silences are as formative as spoken language in a child's deciphering of parental desire.

Walter Benjamin suggests that there is a secret agreement

with past generations. My take on this would not be to invoke the collective unconscious, but rather, following Freud, the phylogenetic content of primal phantasies. Anyway, I was curious to know what was passed on after the specific demands of the moment had faded. And so I started to record what younger women said about the 1970s, such as 'everything was so clear then', or about the 1980s, 'everyone said Feminism's over, but that just made me want to find out what it was all about'. Then I compared these expressions with those from conversations with women who had been in the movement, who would say things like 'everyone has a voice', and 'you didn't speak for others'. I have used both in the new project, a house-like structure that plays on the domestic space of consciousness raising. From the outside you see the comments of one generation, and on the inside, the other. Love Songs includes four other works. There's Flashing Nipple Remix (2005), based on my restaging of the 1971 protest-performance at the Miss World Contest at the Albert Hall in London. I made time exposures of five women performing choreographed movements in the dark wearing lights on their nipples and crotches, and presented them as a series of light box-mounted black and white transparencies. There's also a 72-foot narrative send up of the event, Sisterhood is POW... (2005), laser cut in cast acrylic and illuminated with strip lighting. For me, it's important that the only source of light in the installation is the work itself. The 'ah ha!' effect.

IW You also recreated a Women's Liberation Movement demonstration, WLM Demo Remix (2005), which I thought was uncanny in its similarity to the original.

MK I didn't even have to tell them to wear different clothes – what you see in that image is not just a re-enactment of the moment, but an unconscious identification. I did change the slogan on the placard from 'Unite for Women's Emancipation' to 'From Stone to Cloud', which is a quote from Sylvia Plath's poem, Love Letter (1960). Plath probably wrote it about one of her children, but for me it also captured something that you could think about in terms of collective love.

IW Gloria Patri (1992) was your response to the Gulf War. It was informed by an archive of private material that you have continued to accumulate. I wonder what might be surfacing from the horrific images and texts we are surrounded by at the moment in relation to the war on terror.

MK I'm not there yet. But from 1992 to 1999, my work was almost exclusively about war. I wanted to explore how

everyday attitudes combine with the nationalistic, macho out-look that pertains specifically to situations of war. Gloria Patri was made, as you said, during the first Gulf War, using etched and polished aluminium to materialize the televised spectacle. The installation has three registers, only one at eye level, the others in your peripheral vision: above, medallions with mock military insignia; in the centre, faux trophies I pieced together from objects I found in junk shops and combined with slogans from combatants; below this, shields bearing inscriptions of stories I wrote about failed masculinity. The piece was not aimed only at men; women were also targeted. If you remember, at that time, there was a lot of talk about women breaking the glass ceiling, particularly in the military where they were demanding the right to go to the front. Equal opportunity to kill, maim or torture? Okay, this might have been logical, but it was also important to stop and think about the ethics of such a demand. I thought women were identifying with the masculine ideal in a way that denigrated the feminine. And, ultimately, Gloria Patri comes back to me, to the canvas ceiling and the art world version of this charade.

IW But do you think things are so different in the art world, where feminine terms have been appropriated by male artists as a transgressive act – I am thinking of André Breton and Marcel Duchamp with their respective female alter egos, Nadja and Rose Sélavy?

MK Yes, that's exactly it. So being a woman artist is what I call a double negative. The 'bad girl' phenomenon in the 1990s was a revelation to me. Some women decided not to play the part as my generation did, but to mime the man miming the woman in order to be a great artist!

IW *Mea Culpa* (1999) explores the horrors of war from a very different perspective to *Gloria Patri*.

MK *Mea Culpa* was my attempt to deal with the victims of war crimes. It was the most difficult project I've ever undertaken because it just seemed so difficult to pull off without seeming either megalomaniacal or hysterical. I worked on it from 1996 to 1999, trying to figure out the best way to do it, until I came across what I thought was the perfect medium: the lint that collects in the screen of a domestic clothes dryer; ephemeral yet integral to everyday life. So I transferred my texts in vinyl to the screen, and by controlling the drying process – first white clothes, then black – reproduced them as intaglio script in compressed lint; nothing was added or stamped on. It was very direct,

like an assisted ready-made. The finished work is presented as contiguous panels of texts. You have to keep walking to read it, and can never see everything at once. The phenomenological effect is very rhythmic and I wanted to develop this musical and, in a way, cinematic potential in my next project. The Ballad of Kastriot Rexhepi (2001) is based on the news story of a two-year old boy who was left for dead during the war in Kosovo and later reunited with his parents.

I wrote it in metered prose and arranged it in four stanzas. I always imagined it being sung, so I asked the composer Michael Nyman, who had already approached me earlier about collaborating on an opera, to produce a score for the exhibition in the same way he might do for a film, but with fewer restrictions. The installation was conceived as a 360 degree pan – 200 feet of continuous relief in compressed lint wrapping around the parameter of the gallery space. The lint units alternate in an A-B-A pattern resembling a transverse sound wave with the voice/text running through the centre as a rest line. When The Ballad ... is sung by the soprano Sarah Leonard, accompanied by the Michael Nyman Quartet, the audience surrounds the musicians in an intimate space where the contingent materiality of looks and shuffles support a sense of communality. I don't mean shared experience, but simply human communicability. Although the initial impression of the installation is understated, what happens during the performance is highly charged.

IW Would you agree that this desire to construct such specific environmental experiences has been the impetus behind much of your work?

MK Probably, although I'm not always aware of it – I've been trying to create quiet, contemplative spaces in which the viewer's emotional energy is concentrated internally. People often talk about my work in terms of activism, but, ultimately, I think it's really a reflection on what that means.

Ian White

Ian White is an artist, writer and Adjunct Film Curator at Whitechapel Gallery, London. Mary Kelly has guest-selected a programme of work for his project Kinomuseum, which he curated for the Internationale Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen, which takes place from 3-8 May.