

POSTMASTERS

postmasters 459 w 19 street nyc 10011 212 727 3323

fax 212 229 2829

postmasters@thing.net

ARTFORUM

MAY 2012

I N T E R N A T I O N A L

Mary Kelly

POSTMASTERS GALLERY

Mary Kelly's first solo show in New York since 2005 was an occasion, though the work deviated not a jot from the Conceptualist-feminist trajectory established by the artist in the 1970s. Visually, the affect was cool, perfect—a mood contrasting, deliberately, with the works' approach to issues of violence, memory, and the power of the voice. This conundrum of clinical austerity enframing messy intergenerational feeling hinges on what Kelly calls “the political primal scene.” How and when do we develop historical desire? What trauma exposes our sociopolitical origins?

Four items were on view. *Mimus: Act I*, *Mimus: Act II*, and *Mimus: Act III*, all 2012, are framed assemblages, roughly body-size; *Habitus: Type I*, 2010, a collaboration with sculptor Ray Barrie (Kelly's husband of many years), is a freestanding construction in acrylic sheeting, wood, and mirrored glass. Each work, per Kelly's long-standing mandate to herself, foregrounds text. *Mimus* borrows snippets of testimony by three activists from Women Strike for Peace who appeared in 1962 before the House Un-American Activities Committee. For *Habitus*, Kelly collected reminiscences from four men and four women who were children during World War II.

Mimus's text panels are made of dryer lint, a domestic intaglio that Kelly invented in 1999 and has been using ever since. In this ingenious process, vinyl letters are set onto the lint screen of an ordinary dryer. Clothes dried in sequence—in this case, black, then white—form a scrim, in which the letters show up as cutouts; the shape of the screen compresses each lint panel to a curve. Here, Kelly has arrayed the lint against red backing, with the grayscale shading emphasizing the fibers' low relief. Each *Act* comprises eighty panels, and despite

their black-and-white-and-red-all-over simplicity, the word-images are demanding to decipher. At reading distance, the grids appear photographic, the lint standing in for the grain of enlarged prints. One must come closer—passing, as it were, through the conceptual decoding of language into a confrontation with nonsymbolic materiality—before it becomes apparent that the lint is really there.

Habitus: Type I looks like an open-ended, mini-Quonset hut, and is modeled on the Anderson bomb shelter, a mass-produced, corrugated-metal shed that British families erected in their gardens during the war. Kelly and Barrie's “corrugations” are laser-cut text (one statement each by the eight voices); these bands of words arc across the structure and reflect in the mirror that functions as its ground. The cutout writing becomes, via reflection, a shadow that looks “solidly” legible—a perceptual trick redoubled by the way in which the mirror extends the sculpture's real half cylinder into a complete, albeit simulacral, shape, suggestive of a viaduct or printer's drum half-buried in the gallery's concrete floor.

“You don't quite understand the nature of this movement,” Blanche Posner tells her interrogator in *Mimus: Act I*. “It was motivated by mothers' love for their children. When they were putting breakfast on the table, they saw not only Wheaties and milk, but also strontium 90 and iodine 131 . . .” The heroic Mrs. Posner actually said this, though Kelly has edited her testimony, like that of Ruth Meyers (*Act II*) and Dagmar Wilson (*Act III*), into a script with stage directions: “laughter,” “applause,” “a woman runs up to the witness and gives her a bouquet.” *Mimus* in this way constructs a frame-by-frame, three-act, dryer-lint movie, a courtroom drama that unspools in our minds as we read and move about. *Habitus: Type I* becomes the bildungsroman of a generation: “We lived at the naval base in Alameda. . . . The sun was so hot it melted my doll's head,” one voice reports. Another recalls, “My father was studying law in Vienna until the director gave him an ultimatum: either Jew or Judge.”

The formal chastity of Kelly's art plays sharply, still, against the twentieth century's swooning spectacle. Disciplinary and didactic though they are, her narratives leave open a passageway to fantasy, to the free-floating identification of the self with the experiences of others whose “political primal scenes” engendered ours.

—Frances Richard

Mary Kelly,
Mimus: Act I, 2012,
compressed lint,
83½ x 61 x 2”.

