



e lays his body on the disbelieving ground; does not scream, does not

About a Boy

Inspired by the press account of an Albanian child displaced during the Balkan war, Mary Kelly's newest installation considers the roots of nationalism, the origin of gender identity and the power of the word.

BY ERNEST LARSEN

The ambitious new work by Mary Kelly which premiered last December at the Santa Monica Museum of Art, *The Ballad of Kastriot Rexhepi*, powerfully engages everyday domestic waste in a meditation on the epochal waste of war. In the process, the artist more fully exploits the ingenious working method developed for her previous installation, *Mea Culpa* (1999). For both projects, Kelly attached vinyl letters in Helvetica typeface to the filter of the clothes dryer in her garage. While drying thousands of pounds of black and white cotton clothing, she slowly monoprined texts on the lint trapped against the screen. *Mea Culpa* lit-

erally united Kelly's own texts to the fragile, makeshift fabric in order to examine, albeit elliptically, wrenching moments of brutal conflict in Sarajevo, Beirut, Johannesburg and Phnom Penh. In the *Ballad* she astutely focuses the conceptual and emotional potential of this approach to articulate the implications of just one such story.

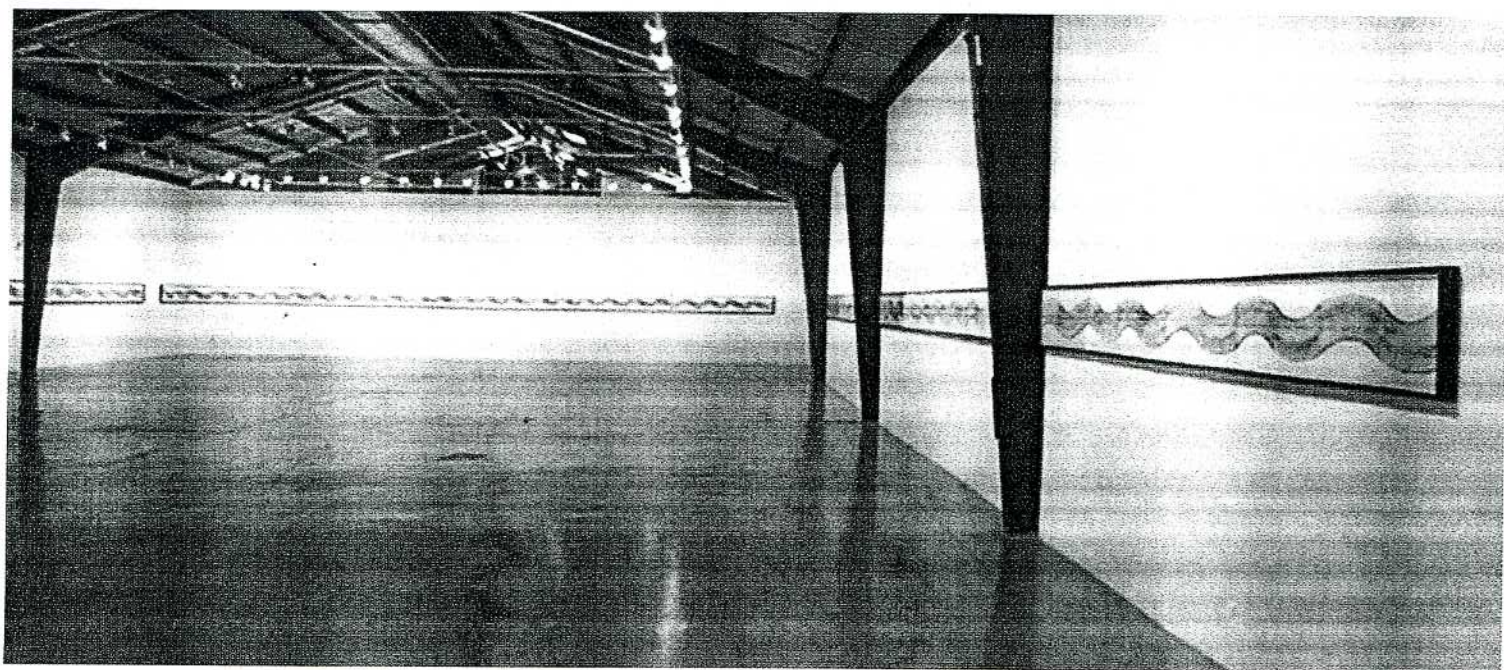
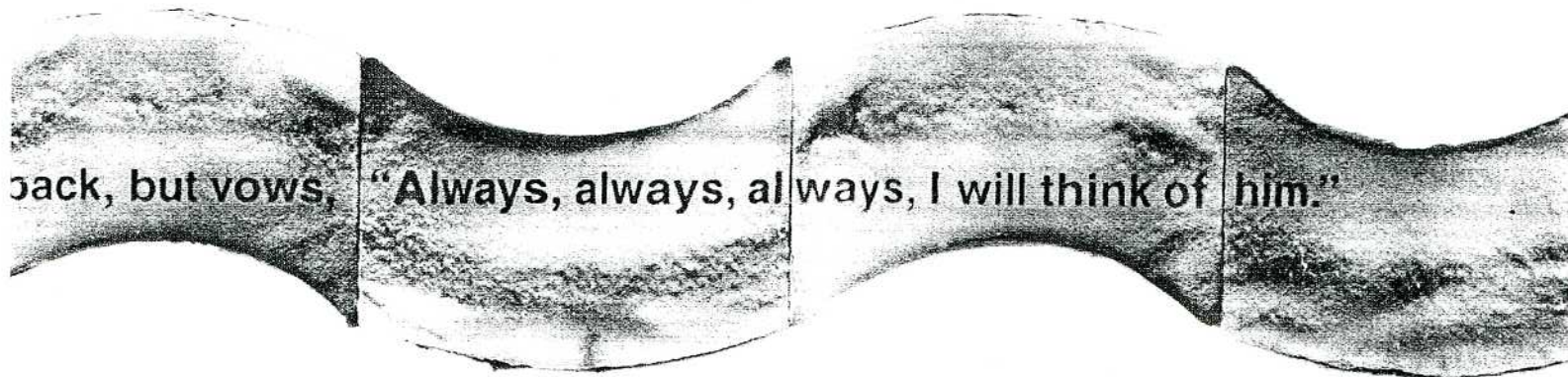
On July 31, 1999, during the NATO occupation of Kosovo, Kelly read a *Los Angeles Times* article headed, "War Orphan Regains Name and Family." Four months earlier, a starving toddler, to all appearances no longer breathing, had been left for dead by his panic-stricken

Albanian parents as they escaped a sustained Serbian attack. Found, still alive, on the battlefield, he was given a new Serbian name, Zoran; left behind in a hospital as the Serbs retreated, he was now assumed to be Albanian and renamed once again: Lirim.

The media routinely single out such human-interest stories as thumbnail compressions of the large-scale movements of history: little Kastriot, innocent victim of the horrors of war, survives against all odds. Transforming the press account, Kelly's own narrative further compresses Kastriot's story of miraculous survival into three stanzas and a shorter envoi which are intended to evoke the traditional folk ballad.

She begins with a dismissal of the comforting illusion of innocence: "Unnatural spring: / metal seedpods germinating bloody flora, / anticipating the 'expulsions.'" Still, there is no escape from the facile affirmation of the media: "Summer, 1999, / happy ending in the *Times*," she writes. In Kelly's reworking of Kastriot's fate, the media offer a simplistic redemption even more false than that of the folk ballad—the "media" of yesteryear—which once served to nurture ethnocentric feeling with mythic evocations of nationalist sentiment.

Embossed in compressed lint, Kelly's ballad advances within a repeated wave form determined by the curved shape of the dryer's filter. These elegant and continuous waves suggest the pulse of the heart, the pull of the ocean, the audio pattern of a recurring sound—all natural forces that intensify the narrative's iconic form. At the Santa Monica Museum of Art, the spare text stretched in a



Installation view of Mary Kelly's *The Ballad of Kastriot Rexhepi*, 2001, compressed lint, 49 panels, 17 by 48 by 2 inches each, 206 feet long overall; at the Santa Monica Museum of Art. Top, detail of Stanza II. All photos this article courtesy the artist.

206-foot line of rhythmic prose that ran across 49 panels to encircle the perimeter of the space. The installation's scale allowed the embedded text of the *Ballad* to resonate at once as word and image, according it the visual sweep of an epic, like a 360-degree shot in a wide-screen war movie. The tension between the narrative's individual incident and its extravagant presentation (more than 200 feet to tell the story of a two-foot toddler) engaged reader-viewers in the contradictions between the private and the public.

Interviewed for the exhibition's small catalogue, Kelly explains that she was particularly attracted by the press's preoccupation with Kastriot's first word upon being reunited with his family, and specifically by the coincidence between "patronym" and "patria" as the child simultaneously claims language, family and nation. Hitherto silent, the boy's momentous passage into speech is witnessed and, as Kelly writes, "by reporters / the tender armistice is staged. / *Mater, pater et familia.* / For the camera, they kiss his coral cheek / and Kastriot,

young patriot, says 'Bab'" (Albanian for "Dad").

Drawing on political and psychoanalytic theory, Kelly portrays Kastriot's entry into the social world of speech as an inscription of national, familial and sexual identities. By accumulating the variants "pater," "patriot" and "Bab," she proposes to isolate the decisive moment in which a toddler becomes a nationalist, which later in life may well provide the indispensable psychological legitimation for acts of uninhibited violence such as those undertaken by the Serbs against Kastriot's own

